

MEASLES VACCINES Drive begins in Dhaka, Mymensingh, Barishal cities

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government launches a special measles-rubella vaccination drive in Dhaka North, Dhaka South, Mymensingh, and Barishal city corporations today amid a surge in measles cases and deaths.

Around 12.20 lakh children aged six months to under five years are expected to be vaccinated under this initiative, according to Shahriar Sajjad, deputy director of the Expanded Programme on Immunisation.

Dhaka North has the largest target group, with 6,47,208 children expected to be covered. In Dhaka South, 4,65,098 children are targeted, while 62,336 children in Mymensingh and 45,319 in Barishal will also be brought under the campaign.

The special drive will be expanded nationwide from April 20 as deadly measles cases continue to rise. Earlier, the government had rolled out an emergency vaccination programme in 30 upazilas across 18 districts where infections were relatively high.

Amid the outbreak, the Directorate

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A farmer cuts paddy in waist-deep water in Badaura Haor in Sylhet's South Surma upazila yesterday, as most croplands in Moglabazar union remain submerged. Farmers say the lack of planned sluice gates and proper drainage systems leaves them struggling to salvage their crops and facing losses every year.

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

US, Iran hold direct peace negotiations

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The US delegation is being led by Vice President JD Vance, special envoy Steve Witkoff, and President Donald Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, the official said, making it the highest-level American contact since the Islamic Republic was established.

The Iranian delegation, composed of more than 70 members, was being led by parliamentary speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, joined by Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi.

They had earlier decided to begin talks with their US counterparts after meeting with Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, according to Iranian media reports.

"Commending the commitment of both delegations to engage

Earlier, an unnamed "senior Iranian source" told Reuters that the US had agreed to unfreeze the assets and that the move was directly linked to ensuring safe passage in the Strait of Hormuz.

Despite progress, the warring parties made no attempt to hide their mutual suspicion.

"Our experience in negotiating with the Americans has always been met with failure and broken promises," Ghalibaf said, shortly after landing in Pakistan.

Before the talks, Araghchi told his German counterpart, Johann Wadephul, that Iran entered the negotiations with the US in "complete distrust".

Vance said before leaving the US

On Friday, Lebanon's presidency said that a meeting would be held with Israel in Washington next week, and a ceasefire with Hezbollah will not be discussed in the talks.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday said that any peace agreement reached with Lebanon must be one that "lasts for generations" and dismantles Hezbollah's weapons.

Netanyahu also said that the joint US-Israeli campaign against Iran had succeeded in "crushing" the Islamic republic's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes. "They wanted to strangle us, and (now) we are strangling them. They threatened us with annihilation, and now they are fighting for survival."

Netanyahu also said the military campaign against Iran "is not over".

the Islamabad talks was to ensure the Islamic republic had "no nuclear weapon. That's 99 percent of it."

Meanwhile, UN agency chiefs yesterday demanded an end to impunity for widespread international law violations in the Middle East, as casualties pile up six weeks into the war unleashed by US-Israeli strikes on Iran.

In a joint statement, the heads of multiple United Nations agencies said they were "alarmed by the sustained violations of the rules of war and international humanitarian law" in the region.

"Even wars have rules, and these rules must be respected," the statement from the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee said.

Libya approves first unified state budget in 13 years

AFP, Tripoli

Libya's rival eastern and western legislative bodies have signed a US-mediated agreement to unify public spending across the divided country for the first time in over a decade, the central bank said yesterday.

The north African country has struggled to recover from the chaos that erupted following the 2011 Arab Spring uprising that toppled longtime ruler Muammar Gaddafi.

It remains divided between a UN-recognised government led by Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibah based in Tripoli and an eastern administration in Benghazi backed by military leader Khalifa Haftar.

"This step reflects real progress toward unifying fiscal policy and strengthening the good management of public spending," the central bank said of the new budget, calling the agreement "the first consensus on unified spending across Libya in over 13 years".

Mob hacks pir to death

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"Three injured people were brought to the facility around 3:20pm. Shamim was declared dead on arrival, while the other two are undergoing treatment."

Additional police, along with Rab and BGB personnel, have been deployed in the area to maintain law and order.

At the scene, Kushtia Superintendent of Police Jasim Uddin told reporters that a case was filed against Shamim at Daulatpur Police Station in 2023 on charges including hurting religious sentiments. He was later arrested and sent to jail.

Talking to The Daily Star, he said, "An old video of the man was recently circulated on social media, containing objectionable remarks about Islam. Its renewed circulation culminated in the attack on the shrine."

Alongside the name listed on his NID card, Shamim used multiple aliases, he added. "At times, he introduced himself as 'Sree Jahangir, Sree Shamim Krishna' and other names."

Quoting locals, he said Shamim's vision was to promote a composite faith by blending elements from different religions.

"Police were present at the scene. We had information about the possibility of an untoward incident in the area. A human chain was also scheduled for the afternoon. We were in contact with the relevant parties, and they had assured us that nothing would happen."

"However, suddenly a group of 300 to 400 people entered the area and carried out the attack. Police tried to bring the situation under control and attempted to rescue him from

inside, but he was attacked with sharp weapons during that time."

Regarding the next course of action, SP Jasim said, "Some of those who orchestrated the attack and those who circulated the video have been identified. But we are not disclosing their names at this stage. We're also trying to determine if the attack was politically motivated."

Talking to the newspaper, Saidur Rahman, one of the followers, said Shamim completed his MA and later moved to Dhaka, where he worked for a private firm. He then became a devotee of Qalandar Baba Jahangir ba-iman al-Sureshwari of Keraniganj and took initiation (bai'at) under him.

Syed Tarik, a sufi and poet, told this newspaper last night, "Shamim later went on to become a pir himself after being granted khilafat."

In Sufism, khilafat means spiritual succession or authority to represent and continue a Sufi master's teachings.

According to Saidur, about five to six years ago, Shamim returned to his village. At first, he lived in a tin-shed house. Gradually, his following grew, and over the past six years he built a concrete building with the support of his followers.

The followers suspect that those aligned with a religion-based political party may have been involved in the attack.

On social media, a section of people had been campaigning against Shamim over the past couple of weeks.

Syed Tarik said, "Shamim's remarks in the viral video now under controversy were not an attack on Islam, but rather a criticism of what he described as inaccurate Tafsir, or interpretation, of the Quran."

First tankers exit

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However, US Central Command said the two warships have transited Hormuz at the start of an operation to clear the strategic waterway of mines laid by Iran.

"Today, we began the process of establishing a new passage, and we will share this safe pathway with the maritime industry soon to encourage the free flow of commerce," said Centcom commander Admiral Brad Cooper.

The development came after US President Donald Trump claimed mine-clearing operations were ongoing in the strait.

Iran recently announced alternative shipping routes in the Strait of Hormuz due to the high risk of underwater mines in the main channel. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) issued a navigation plan to ensure maritime safety, requiring inbound vessels to pass north of Larak Island and outbound traffic to move south of it.

Various sources also said Iran was seeking to impose a toll on ships in cryptocurrency during the ceasefire.

Tehran's blockade of the strait -- a chokepoint for about 20 per cent of global oil and liquefied natural gas shipments -- since the start of the war at the end of February has disrupted

global energy supplies and sent oil prices soaring.

The Liberia-flagged Very Large Crude Carrier (VLCC) Serifos and China-flagged VLCCs Cospearl Lake and He Rong Hai entered and exited the "Hormuz Passage trial anchorage", which bypasses Iran's Larak Island, yesterday, LSEG data showed. Each vessel is capable of carrying about 2 million barrels of oil.

Serifos, carrying crude loaded from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in early March, is expected to arrive at Malaysia's Malacca port on April 21, according to LSEG and analytics firm Kpler.

Cospearl Lake is laden with Iraqi oil, while He Rong Hai is carrying Saudi crude. Both vessels are chartered by Unipet, the trading arm of Chinese energy giant Sinopec, the data showed.

As talks got underway in Islamabad, Trump posted a series of messages on his Truth Social platform.

"We're now starting the process of clearing out the Strait of Hormuz," he wrote in one post, calling it "a favour" to countries such as China, Japan and France that "don't have the courage or will to do this work themselves".

US officials did not immediately respond to AFP requests for comment on the reports.



US Vice President JD Vance shakes hands with Pakistan's PM Shehbaz Sharif during their meeting before US-Iran peace talks in Islamabad yesterday.

constructively, the Prime Minister expressed the hope that these talks would serve as a stepping stone toward durable peace in the region," Sharif's office said.

The talks came as Trump said the US had started "clearing out" the strategic Strait of Hormuz, which Iran has virtually blocked and through which one-fifth of the world's crude passes at peace time.

Iran has previously said that any agreement to end the war must include the unfreezing of sanctioned Iranian assets as well as an end to Israel's war against Hezbollah in Lebanon, which Vance has said will not be up for discussion in Islamabad.

Iranian state television's correspondent at the talks said he understood that progress had been made on these issues, giving Iran the confidence to proceed. A US official denied reports that Washington had agreed to unfreeze Iran assets held in Qatar.

that if the other side was "willing to negotiate in good faith, we're certainly willing to extend the open hand".

But he said the negotiating team would not be receptive "if they're going to try to play us", he added.

Experts, however, said Iran's delegation showed it was serious about leaving Pakistan with a deal.

"The size, seniority, and breadth of the Iranian delegation... signal both Tehran's sincerity in these negotiations and its expectations and confidence," said Trita Parsi, executive vice president of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft.

The ceasefire is already under strain, notably from Israel's continued strikes in Lebanon. Iran and Pakistan insist Lebanon is covered under the current truce, a claim both the US and Israel deny.

The Israeli military yesterday said it had struck more than 200 Hezbollah targets in Lebanon within the last 24 hours, among them rocket launchers.



Pakistan's PM Shehbaz Sharif shakes hands with Iran's Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf during their meeting in Islamabad yesterday.

Prime Minister Sharif, whose country's down-to-the-wire mediation got both sides to the negotiating table this week, said the talks in Islamabad would not be easy.

"An even more difficult stage lies ahead," he said, referring to efforts to permanently end fighting that began with US-Israeli strikes on Iran on February 28, sparking Iranian retaliation against Israel and across the Gulf.

"This is that stage which, in English, is called the equivalent of 'make or break'."

On the US side, Trump has demanded the opening of the Strait of Hormuz as a condition for the two-week ceasefire.

The strait, through which one-fifth of the world's crude passes, has not reopened to normal traffic, however, and Trump vowed on Friday to have it open soon "with or without" Iran's cooperation.

He added that his top priority at

Doors open for ex-owners to reclaim banks

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The banks are First Security Islami Bank, Social Islami Bank, Union Bank, Global Islami Bank, and Exim Bank.

The government and Bangladesh Bank injected Tk 35,000 crore as capital into the merging bank, while the central bank also provided the five banks with additional liquidity support.

Under the ordinance at the time, former owners were barred from involvement, as many were accused of financial scams and embezzlement.

The boards of four of the banks were dominated by the controversial S Alam Group, led by its Chairman Mohammed Saiful Alam, while Exim Bank was long controlled by Nassa Group Chairman Md Nazrul Islam Mazumder.

The BNP-led government has now amended the ordinance, passing it into law in parliament on Friday after Finance Minister Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury placed it before the House.

Bangladesh Bank officials told The Daily Star that concerns remain over how these banks will be managed if former owners return and whether

depositors will be able to recover their money.

They also said that if a bank is returned to its previous owners, it cannot easily be taken back again.

"This raises doubts about whether they would be able to run the banks properly and ensure full legal and regulatory compliance," one official said, adding that the return of the previous owners could hinder the ongoing merger process.

The act empowers the Bangladesh Bank to permit previous owners or other eligible applicants to acquire a bank's shares, assets, and liabilities.

Under the new law, applicants, including former directors or investors, must commit to fully repaying all financial support previously extended by the government and the central bank.

They are required to inject fresh capital to address existing deficits and restore financial health, and settle outstanding claims of depositors, domestic and foreign creditors, and third parties.

About accountability during the

banks' restructuring process, the act states that any losses incurred by individuals or institutions must be compensated.

The applicants must also agree to restrictions on share transfers and commit to strengthening corporate governance, risk management, and compliance structures.

Before approval, the Bangladesh Bank will have to conduct due diligence and seek the government's clearance. Even after approval, the central bank will closely monitor the merged entity for two years, with a special committee reviewing compliance.

Failure to meet conditions could lead to cancellation of approval and further regulatory action under existing laws.

Contacted for comments on the new law, Zahid Hussain, former lead economist at the World Bank's Dhaka office, warned that the provision undermines past reform efforts.

"If, under this law, the previous owners return and reclaim their organisations, the integrity of the new structure created after the merger

could be lost. In that case, all merger-related work would effectively become meaningless," he said.

He said it is widely understood that a large portion of loans in these banks have already turned bad, largely taken by related parties.

"The responsibility for this distress lies with the sponsors and related borrowers," he said. Allowing them to return, he argued, will set a damaging precedent.

"It reinforces a culture of impunity in the financial sector, where wrongdoing is not punished. Governance will weaken further."

"After so many reforms, audits, and a formal merger process, if everything can be reversed through a legal adjustment, it raises serious doubts about the sustainability of institutional reform," Zahid said.

"Ultimately, the law appears to reward those responsible for the crisis rather than holding them accountable," he added.