

## 9 more die from suspected measles

Another die after testing positive, says DGHS

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

At least 10 people died from measles and measles-like symptoms in the 24 hours leading up to 8:00am yesterday, taking the total number of confirmed and suspected measles deaths to 294.

Confirmed measles deaths rose to 50 yesterday, with one additional death reported in the 24 hours, according to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

The death was reported from the Dhaka division, according to the DGHS.

Meanwhile, nine more suspected measles deaths were reported during the same period, bringing the total number of suspected deaths to 244.

Of the latest deaths, four were reported from the Dhaka division, two from Barishal, and one each from the Chattogram, Khulna, and Sylhet divisions.

During the same period, 95 new confirmed cases were reported, raising the total number of confirmed cases to 5,313.

Besides, the DGHS recorded 1,166 new suspected cases in 24 hours, bringing the total number of suspected cases to 40,491.



Editors and senior journalists pose for a photo with Information Minister Zahir Uddin Swapon at a discussion programme organised by the Editors' Council and Newspaper Owners' Association of Bangladesh at the CIRDAP auditorium in Dhaka, marking World Press Freedom Day yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

## 2 farmers die seeing paddy fields flooded

STAR REPORT

Two farmers collapsed and died on the spot after witnessing their ripe paddy fields go under floodwaters in Brahmanbaria and Kishoreganj on Saturday.

In Brahmanbaria, 55-year-old Ahad Mia collapsed after seeing his ready-to-harvest paddy submerged in Nasirnagar upazila, said Upazila Agriculture Officer Imran Shakil.

Around 1,500 bighas of land in the upazila had already been submerged over the past two days, he said.

Doctors suspect he may have suffered a heart attack, he added.

Ahad had reportedly taken loans of about Tk 50,000 to cultivate the land and was the sole earner for his family, which includes two sons and a daughter.

Several other farmers in the area have fallen ill after witnessing similar losses, with at least three currently undergoing treatment, the agriculture officer said.

Nasirnagar UNO Shahina Nasrin said a list of affected farmers would be prepared and necessary government assistance provided.

In Kishoreganj, 60-year-old farmer Akhter Hossain died after falling ill upon seeing his submerged paddy field in Austagram haor, said Nasima Akhter, a reserved member of Deoghar Union Parishad.

Akhter fell sick after seeing the damage to

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## Haor harvest stifled by rain

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December to April.

In seven haor districts, Boro has been cultivated on 4.55 lakh hectares of land. Harvesting has so far been completed on 3.24 lakh hectares, or 71.26 percent, according to Md Jamal Uddin, additional director for monitoring and implementation at the Department of Agricultural Extension's (DAE) Field Services Wing.

He said heavy rainfall between April 26 and May 2 submerged 46,730 hectares of Boro fields, 10.27 percent of the total haor land. To give a complete picture, it will take three to four more days after the water recedes.

On Saturday afternoon at Karimganj's Boro Haor in Sylhet, farmer Saidur Rahman was seen harvesting paddy with a sickle while standing in knee-deep water, assisted by his sons, a ninth grade student and another from class 12.

His 10-year-old girl was carrying the bundles of paddy to a dinghy.

Before the rainfall, labourers were available for Tk 800 to Tk 1,000 per day, but now even Tk 1,500 to Tk 2,000 is not enough, Saidur said.

"For paddy selling at Tk 700 per maund [37.3242kg], what remains for the farmer if Tk 2,000 must be paid for a day's labour? That is why I am harvesting with my entire family," he added.

In Baratia Haor, Abdul Qadir echoed the crisis, harvesting with six family members.

He said combine harvester owners are delaying service, worsening the situation.

The owners also nearly tripled harvester rent. "In less affected areas, the cost would be Tk 6,000 to Tk 7,000 per acre. But here it is Tk 20,000 to Tk 25,000 now. Farmers are the most neglected," Abdul said.

"How can farmers survive if they

have to sell paddy at Tk 600 to Tk 700 per maund? It feels like no one is addressing this situation. Farmers seem like the most neglected," he added.

Farmers also reported difficulties drying harvested paddy due to waterlogged fields, while harvester wheels are getting stuck in mud, slowing operations.

In Kishoreganj, district DAE data showed 9,045 hectares of paddy land have been submerged, affecting around 32,000 farmers.

Its Deputy Director Md Sadiqur Rahman said 367 combine harvesters have been allocated for the haor, though demand far exceeds supply.

Farmer Farid Mia of Sadar upazila said, "Even with money, we can't find labourers, and machines can't enter the water."

"The paddy is ready, but we cannot harvest it. I have agreed to pay Tk 1,600 per katha, whereas last year it was only Tk 500. I am trying with five workers, but nearly five acres of my land are already submerged."

Shamim Mia of Holavanga Beel in Barhata said, "Workers demand Tk 2,000 per katha. Even if we sell all our crops, we can't cover that cost."

Labourers themselves are working under life-threatening conditions.

In Kallian Beel of Kendua in Netrokona, worker Babul Mia said, "Even a slightly cloudy sky scares us. Lightning strikes are frequent. A few days ago, a worker died in Khaliajuri. Everyone says we charge more, but they don't see the risks."

In Habiganj's Ajmiriganj, Sujon Mia said, "There is always some risk during this season, but this time it is more severe. Many workers are afraid to go to the haor due to lightning."

This year, the labour shortage has worsened not only due to adverse weather at the start of the season but also because rising living costs have

reduced workers' availability and willingness to take up farm work.

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, inflation has outpaced wage growth for 50 consecutive months up to March. Wage growth stood at 8.09 percent in March, 0.62 percentage points below inflation of 8.71 percent. In February, the gap was even wider at 1.05 percentage points.

Agricultural economist Jahangir Alam Khan noted that every year groups of agricultural workers from Rangpur and Kurigram travel to the haor regions to harvest paddy. This year, however, their numbers have declined.

One major reason, he explained, is that harvesting has already begun not only in the haor areas but also across the plains, reducing the pool of available labour for haor farmers.

He added that the situation has been aggravated by the lack of proper government planning and management regarding the use of combine harvesters.

"The government must take swift and effective action by ensuring better coordination, timely deployment of machinery, and adequate support for farmers," Jahangir said.

Md Mosharrar Hossain, additional director of DAE in Sylhet division, warned that if the weather persists, submerged paddy will be completely damaged. "Moreover, paddy in the threshing floor was also damaged by rain, and we are calculating the loss too," he said.

According to Sylhet Divisional DAE data, harvesting has been completed on 75 percent of haor areas and 33 percent of non-haor areas, with an overall average of 57 percent. Damage has been reported on 33,913 hectares so far.

[Our correspondents Mintu Deshwara and Dwoha Chowdhury contributed to this report]

## Interim govt's missteps

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THE TRIGGER

The health ministry has been implementing the Health, Population, and Nutrition Sector Programme (HPNSP) since 1998, popularly known as Operation Plans (OPs), to provide a range of health, nutrition, vaccination, and family planning services.

The fourth HPNSP had ended in June 2024 and the then Awami League government had proposed a fifth edition of the OPs worth Tk 1.061 trillion for another five years.

Documents show that a project evaluation committee sat for 60 meetings at the planning commission between July and November, 2024, concluding that this fifth edition would be the final one. The committee asked the health ministry to prepare an exit plan.

But instead, the ministry scrapped the HPNSP altogether in March 2025 and decided to integrate the OPs into regular government programmes. This was done to improve coordination and strengthen infrastructure, officials said.

The ministry had also decided to adopt several "bridging projects" to complete unfinished tasks under the fourth HPNSP and continue the supply of medicines, vaccines, and other essential items.

However, approvals took time. It was not until November 2025 that the projects were given a green light. Then, it took several more months to appoint project directors to run the projects.

Consequently, disrupted procurement led to a suspension of services. It was not just vaccines, but OPs discontinuation meant that over 14,000 community clinics across the country saw their medicine supplies dwindle, leaving thousands to suffer. The 450 NCD corners, dedicated points at Upazila Health Complexes (UHCs) that provide free medicines for hypertension and diabetes, were also deprived of supplies.

Many UHCs could not operate ambulances due to a funding crisis, as fuel costs and drivers' salaries were covered under the programme. Two crucial national campaigns, deworming tablets and Vitamin A Plus capsules, have remained suspended for over a year, a disruption experts say may have worsened the measles outbreak.

Although the interim government made some allocations for medicines, these were insufficient and the shortage still persists.

Prof Be-Nazir Ahmed, a health expert and former director of disease control at the health directorate, said the programme, a proven mechanism, should not have been "discontinued whimsically".

He said that even if there had been allegations of corruption, the interim government could have addressed them instead of abruptly stopping it.

"Besides, where was the exit plan? Had there been an exit plan and had it been implemented properly, the situation might not have evolved like this," he told The Daily Star on May 2.

Epidemiologist Prof Mahmudur Rahman, also chair of the National Verification Committee for Measles and Rubella Elimination, said just as the OPs were suspended so were the services of line directors and programme managers.

As a result, there was a vacuum in manpower, and at one point only three officials remained at headquarters. "This was a major reason behind the problem."

He added that with no OPs in place, the associated funding had also ceased. "Various issues have arisen as authorities moved to a new system using funds from the revenue budget."

Prof Sayedur Rahman, special assistant to the chief adviser of the interim government for the health ministry, said as the sector had long relied on the OPs, the transition

required extensive inter departmental coordination, which took more time which they had not foreseen.

He said in a written interview that the delays were primarily because the officials were not accustomed to the new system and "bureaucratic inertia regarding the new initiative".

**DELAYED PROCUREMENT**

With the OPs scrapped and the bridging projects yet to be approved, Tk 842 crore was finally allocated in August 2025. Bangladesh used to procure vaccines through Unicef under the Direct Procurement Method (DPM). However, in September, the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs decided to directly procure half through Unicef, and the other half through an open tender.

The committee also directed the health ministry to negotiate vaccine prices with Unicef.

"All these decisions caused complications, and we have not received a single vaccine through any of the methods to date," an EPI official told The Daily Star in early April, seeking anonymity.



Unicef strongly opposed the change, reported Science.org on April 30.

"It was very frustrating," Unicef Representative to Bangladesh, Rana Flowers told Science.org, a scientific research, technology and medical news site of the eponymous journal. "For God's sake ... don't do this," Flowers recalled telling the interim government's health adviser Nurjahan Begum, reads the Science.org article.

Another health directorate official, wishing not to be named, said under the OPs, the line director was authorised to place vaccine orders with Unicef simply with one approval from the finance ministry. "But the latest funds, allocated from the revenue budget, require approval from two cabinet committees, apart from other issues, which could take two to three months."

On the other hand, current officials have little experience in procuring vaccines through an open tender, which requires separate tenders for each type of vaccine, which takes even longer.

He said the interim government procured vaccines worth about Tk 200 crore late in 2025 from Unicef on credit when reports of shortage began to trickle in. "But it was not enough."

Stocks of six types of vaccines, including measles, were exhausted by March 2026. But, he said, there used to be a three-month buffer under the previous programme.

Prof Be-Nazir Ahmed said the fact remains that delayed procurement meant vaccination coverage was not properly maintained, resulting in the outbreak. "If responsibility is to be assigned, it falls on the interim government. Their failure to ensure proper vaccination meant herd immunity or collective protection was not achieved."

Prof Sayedur in a Facebook post on Friday said it was important for the government to build its own capacity and reduce dependence on external sources for a long-running vaccination programme. "So, the interim government tried to procure vaccines at competitive prices."

He told this newspaper that the Unicef warning had only reached him on December 30, 2025, when there was little time to review the process which was already in its last stages.

**NO SPECIAL CAMPAIGN**

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) risk assessment report on April 23, the current outbreak is occurring in the context of "suboptimal population immunity".

Bangladesh had made substantial progress in eliminating measles, with first dose coverage rising significantly between 2000 and 2016 and, later, with the second dose coverage between 2012 and 2024. Confirmed cases declined sharply during this period.

The crude vaccination (both valid and invalid vaccinations) of MR 1 was 100.1 percent in 2023, which fell to

92.73 percent in 2025, while MR 2 fell to 90.78 percent in 2025 from 98.1 percent in 2023.

But experts say the actual figure is likely lower, as some evidence suggests vaccinations were falsely reported from the field when health workers were on strikes three times in 2025.

Prof Mahmudur Rahman said that on several occasions, they informed senior officials of the health ministry about the decline but did not see any action.

Another health directorate official requesting anonymity said, even though half the vaccines had arrived following arrangements with Gavi in September 2025, the measles campaign was scheduled in April 2026. "This suggests a lack of understanding of the urgency."

Prof Sayedur, appointed in November 2024, said that the interim government was grappling with the treatment and services of wounded July warriors for the first six months.

Sayedur further prevaricated that there was no alert, warning, or red flag from any national or international authority indicating an urgent need to conduct the special campaign immediately.

When asked to respond to the public sentiment that the ministry's glaring lapses contributed to the tragic child fatalities, Prof Sayedur evaded responsibility and said, "We are all deeply saddened by the loss of these children. These tragedies touch every one of us."

He equivocated further that the ministry had provided timely approvals "according to established procedures" for vaccine procurement.

As much as 74 percent of the confirmed measles patients did not receive either of the two doses of the vaccine, while 14 percent received only one dose, government data show.

## 'Form permanent media commission'

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committee to advise the government on the structure of the commission.

"We want to form this committee based on everyone's opinions. Even if it takes time, it must be credible. Once established, this commission will have the authority to handle news outlet registration and find ways to regulate the digital sphere," he added.

Sajjad Sharif, executive editor of Prothom Alo, reminded the audience that political parties had pledged to form an independent media commission before the elections.

"I remember our senior journalists working together to draft a roadmap for this commission. It focused on two main areas. First, addressing the chaos and irregularities of the last 15 years, where legal loopholes were exploited to control the media and lead it astray.

"Second, this government made an election pledge to fulfil this, but that promise remains unfulfilled. I request that the media should not be treated merely as a tool for running the government," he said.

Nurul Kabir, editor of New Age and chief of the Editors' Council, urged the government to act on past recommendations rather than offering new assurances to form commissions or enact laws.

"We want to engage with you, but when we begin that engagement, we want to know which pro-democracy information policies you already agree with, even before we meet. If the government has the will, we are ready. If not, it is our responsibility to realise our demands," he said.

Shamsul Huq Zahid, editor of The Financial Express, recalled that the Media Reform Commission had

submitted over 20 proposals on journalists' economic conditions and freedoms to the interim government, but these were never implemented.

Kamal Ahmed, consulting editor of The Daily Star and head of the Media Reform Commission, said, "There is supposed to be a distinct boundary between the owner and the editor, but often that line is blurring," he said.

He cited examples of newspapers suppressing or omitting names from reports on official lists of money launderers and loan defaulters.

"When the prime minister answered a query in parliament and released a list of those accused of money laundering abroad, and similarly, when a list of the top loan defaulters was published, on both occasions, we saw how certain newspapers handled the news.

"Either they suppressed the entire list, or they published it while intentionally omitting the name of their own organisation's owner. In such a scenario, how can the editor of that institution claim credibility before their readers? How can they claim to be delivering news that is accurate, objective, and unbiased?" he said.

Kamal stressed the need for a code of conduct but warned against government control. "The question remains: who will enforce this code? Our experience tells us that if we hand this power over to the government, it will lead to an abuse of authority. Therefore, it is our own responsibility to ensure that this code, our stance, and the core principles of journalism are followed," he said.

Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star, announced that the Editors' Council is drafting two codes of conduct: one for owners and another

for editors.

"Suppose an investor builds a hospital. They are the owner. But can they run the hospital? If they do, patients will die. Equally, many people can be the owners of the media, but only the editor can run it. Because if the owner tries to run the media, it will lead to a deviation from media values," he said.

"We must be more ethical... We should remain within what I'd call ethical journalism, one grounded in values. We must not practise journalism with the intent to denigrate anyone regarding any matter," he added.

Reaz Ahmad, editor of Dhaka Tribune, said Bangladesh has a vibrant media landscape "in terms of quantity, if not always quality", and urged a transformation toward "qualitative excellence".

Several speakers expressed alarm over the spread of fake news on social media.

Hasan Hafiz, editor of Kaler Kantho, warned of rampant character assassination and obscenity on social media, particularly targeting women.

"People are hungry for information ... Because they do not get news from mainstream sources or fail to find truthful reporting, they turn elsewhere," he said.

Noab President and Manab Zamin Editor-in-Chief Matiur Rahman Chowdhury criticised the race for "likes" and "views" on platforms such as YouTube and Facebook.

"As long as this race continues, there is no way to escape misinformation. The mainstream media stands helpless," he said.

AMM Bahauddin, editor of Inqilab, and Shahriar Karim, executive editor of Sangbad, also spoke at the event.