

They were gone before he could even name them

Mohammad Hasan Sardar says his twin sons fell ill in a hot, suffocating post-operative room at Ad-din

TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY

The twin newborn boys of Mohammad Hasan Sardar were set to be discharged from Dhaka's Ad-din Medical College Hospital on May 27, 2026 – four days after coming into this world.

Everything they would have needed had been bought. They just had not been named yet.

Both died before they could see their home.

The twins were among the six newborns who died after falling ill in the hospital's post-operative room early on May 27.

Hasan, a fish trader living in Dhaka's Nandipara, said his wife had told him that the atmosphere inside the room became unusually hot and stuffy after 2:00am.

"There was a warm, suffocating feeling in the room. The environment did not seem normal. There was also a strange smell, which some thought could be from medical gases," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

According to him, the babies began crying,

vomiting, and struggling shortly afterwards.

"After vomiting, the babies started twitching and writhing. All of them were in a similar condition," he said.

Hasan alleged that no doctor or nurses were present in the room when the condition of the babies began deteriorating.

"My wife and others looked for them [doctors and nurses], but could not find anyone. Only an aaya [caregiver] was there," he claimed.

By the time his twins were taken to the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU), their conditions had become critical, he said.

"They had turned blue from repeated vomiting. If timely steps had been taken, perhaps my sons would've been still alive," Hasan said.

Hasan's sister, Rabeya Begum, who was inside the post-operative room at the time, made similar allegations. When a nurse finally came after being called, she took another baby to the NICU, Rabeya said.

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On the last day of Eid-ul-Azha holidays yesterday, Dhaka was yet to regain its usual bustle. With many offices and businesses remaining closed, the city's busy roads and footpaths saw thinner crowds. Fewer buyers meant many hawkers had not set up their stalls, leaving the pavements unusually quiet. The photo was taken in the Baitul Mukarram area of Paltan.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

ADP for health doubles

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With the BNP government set to present its first budget this month, the National Economic Council, chaired by Prime Minister Tarique Rahman, approved the Tk 3.09 lakh crore ADP on May 19.

Of the Tk 35,530 crore health allocation, the Health Services Division will receive Tk 26,806 crore and the Medical Education and Family Welfare Division Tk 8,221 crore, and the remaining Tk 503 crore earmarked for health-related activities across other ministries.

When contacted, Health Minister Sardar Md Sakawat Husain said the interim government had worked in an unplanned way and did not prioritise development spending.

Asked whether the ministry would be able to utilise the increased allocation, the minister said, "We will make every effort to achieve it... We will prove that through our work."

POOR RECORD

In the outgoing fiscal year, a total of Tk 18,148 crore was allocated to the health sector under the ADP, with over Tk 12,884 crore earmarked for the two divisions.

The remaining amount was set aside for block allocations as well as health-related activities carried out by other ministries.

But like in previous years, the two divisions once again ranked among the worst performers in implementing development budgets, prompting the government to slash more than 65 percent of their original ADP allocation in the revised budget.

The two divisions could spend only Tk 933 crore till April this year – around

20 percent of the revised ADP.

Except for fiscal 2020-21, none of the two divisions achieved the national average of ADP implementation since 2017 when the health ministry was split into two divisions. In fiscal 2020-21, the MEFWD had barely crossed the national average of 82.11 percent, show documents from the Monitoring and Evaluation Division.

REASONS BEHIND POOR SHOW

Rumana Huque, a professor of economics at Dhaka University said that lengthy and complicated procurement process is one of the key reasons behind the poor budget implementation.

Procurement which was supposed to take 12 months often took up to 18 months, delaying expenditure significantly, she said adding that though the electronic government procurement (e-GP) system has been introduced, many officials still lack the skills to use it effectively.

Another major obstacle is the complicated process of approving and releasing funds. While allocations for the first two quarters are often released together, authorities must submit expenditure statements and seek fresh approvals to access funds for the remaining two quarters, leading to delays in spending, she said.

Problems in the supply chain and weak coordination between planners and budget officials also hamper implementation, said Rumana, also the executive director of ARK Foundation, which works on the health sector.

In particular, delays in project approvals and the replacement of many project directors following the 2024

political transition were major reasons for poor implementation this fiscal year, she added.

Sayed Abdul Hamid, a professor at the Institute of Health Economics of DU, said many project directors and officials lack the necessary training in public financial management, hindering progress in project implementation.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

Welcoming the increased allocation for the health sector, both economists suggested several measures to ensure proper utilisation of funds.

Rumana said the government should prioritise reducing people's out-of-pocket healthcare expenditure instead of focusing heavily on new infrastructure.

To ease the financial burden on patients, the government should increase spending on medicines, vaccines, and other essential services, as patients currently bear a large share of these costs, she said, adding that preventive healthcare should also be prioritised.

Hamid said that if the government is to ensure proper and full implementation of the health budget, it must strengthen health agencies, provide project directors with necessary training, make fund disbursement smoother, and select qualified contractors.

He also suggested establishing a cell at the health ministry to ensure coordination among the agencies involved in procurement and a help desk at the Directorate General of Health Services to assist health administrators in proper utilisation of funds.

Tarique warns of tough days, seeks support

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pass lightly, it will cause a great loss," he said while addressing a discussion at the Krishibid Institution Bangladesh.

The prime minister said the loss will not be for any individual but for the country and future generations. "So, let us work together to build the country in the way Shaheed Zia wanted and move it forward along the path he envisioned. We must run the country in line with that vision."

BNP organised the discussion programme, marking the 45th death anniversary of party founder and former president Ziaur Rahman.

Tarique said Ziaur Rahman wanted to make Bangladesh self-reliant by gradually developing every sector of the country, and the BNP's election manifesto reflects that vision.

He said BNP presented its plans to the people before the election, and voters endorsed those plans by giving the party a two-third majority.

"Until February 12, it was BNP's manifesto. But after the election

results, it became the manifesto of the people who voted for it. It is now our responsibility to implement it."

The prime minister said government programmes will not succeed through the efforts of the ruling party MPs and the cabinet members alone.

"The government can succeed only when party workers support every positive initiative and help implement programmes at the grassroots level."

Referring to Ziaur Rahman's contributions, he said many of the policies outlined in the manifesto were inspired by the former president's initiatives.

Tarique said the manifesto includes programmes similar to Zia's canal excavation project, as well as plans to expand education, promote industrialisation and create employment opportunities.

Recalling the party's political struggles, the PM said BNP leaders and activists worked tirelessly before the February 12 election to secure victory and that their responsibilities have not ended with the formation of the

government.

"Our hard work must continue. Just as we succeeded through an election, we must now succeed in implementing our goals and commitments. Only then can we become a truly successful government in the eyes of the people," he said.

Tarique said many party leaders and activists might think they have no direct role because they are not MPs, ministers or elected representatives.

But he stressed that maintaining organisational discipline, carrying out political activities properly and keeping the party strong are important contributions to the government's success.

The PM urged party leaders and activists to take a fresh pledge on the occasion of Ziaur Rahman's death anniversary to do that.

"People have given their verdict in favour of our manifesto. Let us work together to implement that manifesto and ensure the success of the government. That will be the best way to pay proper respect to Shaheed Zia."

No deal with US until Iran's rights secured

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According to the Tasnim news agency, "exchanges between Iran and the United States regarding the text of a possible memorandum of understanding are ongoing, with both parties regularly proposing amendments."

"No agreement has yet been finalised, and it is possible that any agreement will be rejected," it said.

Iran has said it needs the release of \$12 billion in frozen assets before engaging in substantive talks on its nuclear programme, dismissing earlier Trump comments that its enriched uranium stockpile would be destroyed as "baseless", according to Iranian media.

Tehran has also insisted that Lebanon be included in any deal, despite ongoing fighting, with Beirut accusing Israel of a "scorched earth policy" as it expands operations against Iran-backed Hezbollah.

After Trump and US officials earlier

said they were on the brink of striking a deal, he struck a less urgent tone and hinted at renewed military action in the Fox interview.

"I'm in no hurry," he said. "Slowly but surely we're getting, I think, what we want and if we don't get what we want, we're going to end in a different way."

Meanwhile, Iran's Revolutionary Guards had shot down a US military drone "about to enter Iranian territorial waters to conduct hostile operations", Iran's state broadcaster IRIB reported, an incident that has not been confirmed by the United States.

The Guard Corps also said 28 vessels, including oil tankers, containers and other commercial ships, passed through the Hormuz over the past 24 hours "with the coordination and security of the IRGC Navy".

The US military said Saturday it had disabled a Gambia-flagged cargo vessel attempting to sail to an Iranian port

by launching a missile into its engine room.

Qatar has rejected proposals for permanent transit fees in the Strait of Hormuz, warning that such measures would ultimately drive up costs for consumers worldwide, Al Jazeera reports.

Speaking at the Shangri-La Dialogue security forum in Singapore, Qatar's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Defence Affairs Sheikh Saoud bin Abdulrahman Al Thani said Doha and its Gulf partners oppose any long-term toll system for ships passing through the strategic waterway. "But for certain times that they say they will use it for mine clearing or some usage of the fees for a temporary time, this is something that is negotiable."

In a separate development, Iran's Revolutionary Guards have attacked the bases of separatist groups in northern Iraq, Iranian state media said yesterday.

Mob killings hit six-month high in May

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Speaking at a Police Week programme on May 10, Salahuddin said the government would amend existing laws or enact new ones if necessary to curb mob violence.

In its May report, undersigned by its founding president Advocate Sultana Kamal, MSF said public safety has become a serious concern amid the alarming rise in mob violence.

The group's statistics show that, of those killed in mob violence in May, 14 were attacked over allegations of theft, four following altercations, two over allegations of robbery, two over allegations of attempted rape and sexual assault, one over allegations of murder, one over "insulting remarks", one over an allegation of mugging, one over drug peddling, and six over various other allegations.

At least 35 of the injured victims were later handed over to police, it added.

In another April-May comparative analysis, the MSF said violence against women and children, including rape, had also risen at an alarming rate.

Incidents of rape, attempted rape,

gang rape, and murder following rape have all increased significantly, indicating a severe deterioration in the situation of women and children in the country, it said.

The rights body's findings show that at least 326 incidents of violence against women and children were recorded in May, 12 more than the previous month.

At least 78 rapes were reported in May – nearly 40 percent higher than the number of rapes recorded in April. Besides, 16 gang rapes and six cases of murder following rape were reported. Fourteen gang rapes were and two murders following rape were reported in April.

The MSF report highlighted the rape, murder, and beheading of eight-year-old Ramisa, and praised the state's prompt action in arresting the accused and initiating the trial process.

However, it stressed that the state must ensure impartial and speedy trials in all cases of violence against women and children.

The rights body said there were signs of improvement in some areas

of the human rights situation in May compared with April, including a decline in incidents of political violence.

At least three people were killed and 193 others were injured in May, while three people were killed and 303 were injured the previous month.

According to MSF, seven people died in jail custody in May, compared with six in April and 11 in March.

It said four Bangladeshi nationals were killed by the Indian Border Security Force in May, including three who were shot dead and one who died after being tortured.

Besides, the bodies of a fisherman and an unidentified woman were recovered from areas along the Bangladesh-India border. In addition, a young man was publicly stabbed to death by miscreants in a border-adjacent area, bringing the total number of border-related deaths to 10 in May, up from eight in April.

Meanwhile, along the Myanmar border, three Bangladeshis were killed on the spot in two separate landmine explosions in May.

Poor airflow and management likely to blame

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"We will try to reach all the families and hope to submit our report on June 3," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

The babies died within a few hours of each other from 6:00am on Wednesday at the hospital in the capital's Moghbazar, with health officials suspecting that a technical failure in the hospital's post-operative room may have caused the tragedy.

Two babies were brought dead to the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU), while four of them died while being treated there, according to hospital authorities.

The exact cause of the deaths has yet to be confirmed, but officials of the Directorate General of Health Services have shed light on possible reasons behind the tragedy.

Speaking to reporters on the day of the incident, Prof Zahid Raihan, additional director general (administration) of the DGHS, said, "We do not think the sudden deaths of six children occurred due to treatment complications. We suspect some technical issue or fault may have been responsible."

This correspondent spoke with three senior DGHS officials, two members of the probe committee, three family members of the victims and also visited the hospital.

One DGHS official said the post-operative room felt suffocating as there was no alternative ventilation system or windows besides air conditioners.

It was learned that the air conditioner was switched off for about an hour around 2:00am after a guardian in the post-operative room complained that the babies were feeling cold.

At the time, all six babies and their mothers were in the room. Five other mothers were also there while their babies were admitted to the NICU.

"There should have been a protocol for managing the post-operative room, and any decision to switch off the air conditioner should have been made in accordance with that protocol, not at the request of a guardian. It is linked to the breathing conditions of newborns. I think this was a lapse," a DGHS official told this correspondent, requesting anonymity due to the ongoing investigation.

Another official said the condition of one newborn deteriorated around 4:00am, and the baby was shifted to the NICU. About half an hour later,

the infant was returned to the post-operative room after showing signs of improvement.

From 6:00am onwards, the babies started dying.

"So, there was a considerable gap between the time the babies' conditions deteriorated and their deaths. Had there been proper management and an adequate workforce, the children might not have faced such an outcome."

Mohammad Hasan Sardar, who lost twin babies in the tragedy, said his wife had told him that the atmosphere inside the post-operative room became unusually hot and stuffy after 2:00am.

"There was a warm, suffocating feeling in the room. The environment did not seem normal. There was also a strange smell, which some thought might have come from medical gases," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

According to him, the babies began crying, vomiting, and struggling shortly afterwards. "After vomiting, all the babies started shaking."

Hasan alleged that no doctor or nurse was present in the room when the babies' conditions began to deteriorate.

"My wife and other attendants looked for doctors and nurses but could not find anyone. Only an aaya [caregiver] was there."

Janu Begum, the grandmother of another baby who died that day, said her three-day-old grandchild had been fine earlier.

"Around Fajr, all the children in the room started crying and were later taken to the NICU."

She alleged that the mothers lost their babies due to mismanagement by the hospital authorities.

A DGHS official said the hospital had been built by combining four buildings, but its corridors were so narrow that "people would die of suffocation in the event of a fire before they could even be evacuated".

"There should be an investigation into how the hospital obtained its fire safety and environmental clearance certificates," he said.

Another official said, "The infrastructure is not what it should be for a hospital. This is problematic."

Speaking to The Daily Star on Wednesday, DGHS Director General Prof Pravath Chandra Biswas said the post-operative room is located on the first floor of the hospital, while the NICU is on the fifth floor.

"The rooms should have been closer to each other. We found it [the distance between them] problematic."

During a visit to the hospital on Saturday, Health Minister Sardar Md Sakawat Husain found a bread factory on the top floor of one of the buildings attached to the hospital, as well as stagnant water on the premises.

"We will test the stagnant water and examine whether any substance from the bread factory, or any gas that may have exceeded the babies' tolerance levels, was being emitted. Since we detected an odour inside the room, we will investigate it thoroughly," he told reporters.

A member of the probe committee, seeking anonymity, said the investigation was almost complete and that there would be "no big difference" between its findings and those of DGHS officials.

Contacted by The Daily Star yesterday, Tariqul Islam Mukul, director of HR and Company Affairs at Ad-din Foundation, which runs the hospital, refuted the allegations.

"It is true that there was no doctor stationed in that particular post-operative room, but a doctor was available in nearby units. No hospital assigns a dedicated doctor to a post-operative room," he said, claiming that a nurse was present.

Regarding the alleged delay in responding to the babies' deteriorating conditions, he said hospital staff transferred the newborns to the NICU as soon as complaints were received.

He also claimed that the hospital has a protocol for operating the post-operative room.

"However, something might have gone wrong. We have many things to learn and correct from this incident."

Regarding the infrastructural shortcomings, Tariqul said the hospital's licence had been renewed by the DGHS with the existing structure and that it would make necessary changes if ordered to do so.

DGHS Director General Prof Pravath yesterday said three members from Bangladesh Shishu Hospital and Institute, the Public Works Department, and the National Electro-Medical Equipment Maintenance Workshop & Training Center were co-opted into the probe committee to ensure the investigation is accurate and impartial, as the issue is highly sensitive.