

Five more die with measles-like symptoms

Death toll now 610

UNB, Dhaka

Five more children have died from measles-like symptoms in the 24 hours till 8:00am yesterday, raising the fatalities from the disease and symptoms in Bangladesh to 610.

The Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) has classified the latest casualties as suspected.

With the latest figure, the total number of suspected measles deaths has reached 519, while the confirmed deaths remained the same at 91.

A total of 1,168 suspected measles cases were recorded in 24 hours, taking the overall suspected cases to 76,876.

During the same period, 243 new confirmed measles cases were reported, bringing the total number of confirmed infections to 9,503.

Since March 15, a total of 62,287 suspected measles patients were hospitalised, of whom 58,154 have recovered, according to the DGHS data.



After ducking under a lowered safety barrier, pedestrians stand just inches from a train passing through Moghbazar Wireless Rail Crossing in the capital. Such disregard for warning signals could have led to a fatal accident. The photo was taken recently.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Subsidy burden set to rise for power

FROM PAGE 1

There are two solution options: cost reduction or price increases, he said.

But cost reduction requires reforming the capacity charge agreements, which are already contractually determined. Unless those contracts are reformed, the capacity charge will not decrease.

"The government would have to resort to some cleverness here. The private power producers are currently in a strong contractual position. If the government unilaterally cancels contracts, it may have to pay compensation in international arbitration."

Therefore, to reduce costs, the government should either negotiate

with them or, if evidence of irregularities in the contract process is found, use that as leverage to revise the contracts.

Beyond this, there are limited opportunities to reduce costs.

Some savings could be achieved by reducing distribution losses and increasing efficiency in electricity management, but compared to total expenditure, these are not very significant.

The alternative is price increases, he said.

Implementing such a decision could generate about Tk 13,000 crore in additional annual revenue. Even then, a significant amount of subsidy would still be required, he said.

On export sector incentives, he said that as Bangladesh graduates from the list of Least Developed Countries, it will have to gradually withdraw export subsidies.

However, instead of directly reducing incentives, increasing the source tax rate would have the same effect in a roundabout way.

On remittance incentives, he said that since the dollar exchange rate has risen significantly, the need for incentives is not as strong as before.

"However, this is a politically very sensitive issue. If incentives are reduced, many economists and opposition parties will become vocal in criticising such a government decision."

Ministers, MPs face closer PMO scrutiny

FROM PAGE 1

has also come to the government's notice, said the sources.

Talking to The Daily Star, Home Minister Salahuddin Ahmed said the prime minister is evaluating the work of ministers every three months, while MPs and senior government officials are also being reviewed to see whether they are carrying out their duties properly.

He said the premier, as head of the cabinet, has the responsibility to monitor all ministers.

"If there is success anywhere, the credit goes to the prime minister. If any minister fails, people will ultimately blame the prime minister. So, it is his prime duty to monitor the functions of all ministers," said Salahuddin, also a BNP Standing Committee member.

He said the review covers corruption allegations, delivery of administrative services under the rules of business, implementation of cabinet decisions, use of development budgets, and the pace of project implementation.

The strict position was taken in light of past experience, when allegations of abuse of power by ministers and MPs, contractor syndicates, interference in the administration, corruption, and lack of accountability during the Awami League period, said government sources.

The government does not want a repeat of such practices, which had weakened public trust in elected representatives and created resentment at the grassroots. The government now wants to prevent irregularities through party influence, reduce negligence in development projects, stop harassment in public services, and protect its image, they added.

PMO sources said MPs who do not regularly stay in their constituencies, face allegations related to development projects, exert pressure on the administration, or are linked to contractor syndicates and lobbying activities are being identified separately.

Meanwhile, at an internal meeting, Tarique said he would take action himself if allegations of corruption, irregularities, lobbying, abuse of power or anti-people activities were found.

A PMO official involved in the process said the reports would be sent to the PM after the assessment is completed.

"We are looking at how MPs are doing people-focused work in their areas, whether they are involved in irregularities, and what role they are playing in protecting the government's image and implementing its promises," said the official, seeking anonymity.

To strengthen accountability and inter-ministerial coordination, a cell has been formed at the PMO. The cell is monitoring ministries' progress, priority programmes, field-level reports, and administrative coordination.

Several ruling party MPs said the initiative has created caution at the field level. They added that the work of local administration officials should be monitored more closely.

Shahadat Hossain Selim, BNP lawmaker from Lakshmipur-1, told this newspaper that over three months have passed since the government was formed, but questions remain over whether the local administration is carrying out its duties properly.

"The local administration is not cooperating with MPs. The administration has to be more sincere. This is the picture everywhere. It is a barrier to implementing the government's commitments. I hope the prime minister has paid attention to that matter."

An MP from Dhaka said, "The prime minister is directly observing these matters. This is giving a message at the field level. If anyone thinks that after being elected, they will not have to be accountable for five years, that is no longer possible."

Another lawmaker, who is from Chattogram, said many field-level problems do not properly reach Dhaka, while allegations of local influence are also common. "If regular evaluations are conducted by the central authorities, it will be easier to distinguish genuine problems from those arising from personal influence."

A Mymensingh MP said local work often remains stalled due to administrative complications, contractor-related problems or lobbying. "If the central authorities regularly ask for updates, not only the work of MPs but also the role of the administration will become visible."

Another ruling party MP, wishing not to be named, said accountability is necessary, but the system should not be used politically.

"An allegation should not automatically make someone guilty. The allegation must be investigated, the person concerned must be heard, and then action should be taken. Otherwise, even a good initiative may send the wrong message."

BGB foils multiple push-in attempts

FROM PAGE 1

Lt Col Mehedi Imam, commanding officer of the BGB-15 Lalmonirhat Battalion, said all individuals were stopped at the zero line, reports our local correspondent.

He added that the border remains under close watch and BGB is on high alert, with ongoing communication with the BSF regarding the incident.

According to the BGB media cell, 11 individuals were first seen being pushed towards Bangladesh through the Barakhata Border Outpost area under the BGB-61 Teesta Battalion. Around the same time, 10 more individuals were reportedly being pushed in through the Paishattibari BOP area.

BGB patrol teams moved quickly to both locations after receiving information and took control of the situation. The individuals were stopped at the border and remained on the Indian side. Patrols and surveillance in the area have since been increased.

At a nearby stretch of the border, patrol teams from Durgapur and Dighaltari BOPs under the BGB-15 Lalmonirhat Battalion spotted another group of 12 people near border pillars 925 and 927 on the Indian side. BGB personnel used loudspeakers to warn them, after which they did not attempt to cross into Bangladesh.

Officials said the individuals are now staying inside Indian territory; the BGB is in communication with the BSF-3 Battalion to verify their identities.

In Panchagarh, BSF tried to push 10 people, including women and children, into Bangladesh through the Barabari-Pradhanpara border in the morning.

Lt Col Md Sirajul Islam, commanding officer of Nilphamari-56 BGB Battalion, said

BSF claimed the individuals are Bangladeshi nationals, but their identities have not yet been verified by BGB, reports our Thakurgaon correspondent.

Until confirmed, they will not be allowed to enter Bangladesh, the BGB official further said, adding that international rules do not allow one country to force people into another country.

Personnel from both BGB and BSF took positions on their respective sides of the border during the situation.

The group includes five men, two women and three children, according to BGB. They remained stuck in the no-man's land between the two countries.

A flag meeting was later held between the company commanders of BGB's Barabari camp and BSF's Sakati camp. It took place on the zero line between 10:00am and 12:00pm.

However, the meeting ended without any resolution.

BGB is maintaining strict patrols and surveillance along the border to prevent similar incidents.

In Naogaon, BSF's attempt to push in 17 people, including women and children, along the Hapania border in Sapahar upazila, was thwarted by BGB, reports Prothom Alo.

According to BGB, members of the 88 BSF Pannachhara camp tried to push the group through pillar 238/MP around 8:00am. On information, a BGB patrol from the Hapania border outpost rushed to the spot and foiled the attempt. The 17 individuals are now stranded at the zero line.

Lt Col Ariful Islam Masum, commanding officer of BGB-16 Naogaon Battalion, told Prothom Alo that patrols have been intensified

following the incident. "Procedures to return them to Indian territory are underway."

In Chapainawabganj, 28 people were stranded near the zero line at the Bangabari border in Gomostapur upazila after a similar push-in attempt by the BSF was foiled by the BGB.

Lt Col Ariful Islam Masum told UNB that BSF personnel attempted to push the 28 individuals into Bangladesh through border pillar 203/6-S around 3:00am on Thursday.

The group consists of 12 men, 10 women and six children, he said.

BGB patrol teams from Bangabari Border Outpost resisted the attempt, after which the individuals remained stranded along the zero line.

Sources said later in the day a flag meeting was held at company commander level, followed by a battalion commander-level meeting between the BGB and BSF.

Initially, the BSF denied the push-in attempt during the meeting. However, it later acknowledged the incident at the battalion commander-level discussion. BSF had informed the meeting that the matter would be reported to its higher authorities, and a decision would be conveyed to the BGB following instructions.

However, no further communication had been received from the BSF as of yesterday morning.

The BGB official added that the stranded individuals are currently staying around 50 yards inside Indian territory near the zero line.

According to a report by rights organisation Human Rights Support Society (HRSS), BSF pushed at least 166 people into Bangladesh through various border points during the month of May.



A man, along with women and children, surrounded by BSF men at zero line near Lalmonirhat yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

Govt to self-finance Padma Barrage

FROM PAGE 1

When asked about New Delhi's response to the renewal, he said India is a friendly neighbouring country and that Bangladesh's relations with all its neighbours will remain strong.

"Technical teams from both Bangladesh and India are working on the renewal, with both sides maintaining constant communication."

He said expert teams are working to incorporate new conditions, including additional guarantee clauses, into the treaty.

On the Padma Barrage project approved recently by the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (ECNEC), the minister said the project was initiated in 2002 by the then prime minister Khaleda Zia.

Though a feasibility study was almost complete by 2013, the subsequent governments didn't proceed with the project. "Why it was not implemented remains unclear," Anee said, adding that the interim government reinitiated the project in January this year.

When Prime Minister Tarique Rahman went to Rajshahi ahead of the February 12 national election, he made an electoral pledge to build the barrage.

"We have taken up this project as per his commitment, and it will be implemented entirely with government funds."

Steps have been taken to conduct a fresh feasibility study, and if necessary, more studies will be carried out before starting construction, he said, adding that an allocation will be made in the upcoming budget for this purpose.

It will take seven years to build the barrage at a cost of around Tk 35,000 crore, with an average annual allocation of Tk 5,000 crore.

"I believe we will be able to complete this project with our own funding if we can curb corruption. The amount is very little when compared with

the huge sums laundered out of the country in the past."

Stressing the project's importance, the minister said the barrage is vital for around seven crore people across 24 to 26 districts that face severe floods during the monsoon and water scarcity in the dry season.

Under the project, a reservoir will be created in the Padma River to store water to support agriculture and fish production.

Asked whether Bangladesh had any talks with India about the barrage, he said, "This is a matter of domestic interest. There is no need to discuss it with them."

Regarding China's interest in funding the Teesta project, he said, "It will require half the amount needed for the barrage. Why do we have to take it from China?"

He also said a more detailed study is needed before any proposal on the project is placed at an ECNEC meeting.

CANAL DIGGING PROGRAMME
Regarding the ambitious programme of digging 20,000km of canals, he said that in line with the party's electoral pledge, the PM inaugurated the drive at Shahpara canal in Dinajpur on March 16, with local MPs launching the work in their areas the same day.

"We took up a 180-day programme aimed at digging 1,500km of canals in the first six months," the minister said, adding that more than 800km of 666 canals have already been dug.

"Over the next five years, we expect to exceed the 20,000km target, with a possible range of 24,000-25,000km."

Drawing inspiration from the historic canal-digging campaign initiated by BNP founder Ziaur Rahman in the late 1970s, the programme aims to boost the rural economy and combat falling groundwater levels, he said.

Once complete, it will enable farmers to use surface water for irrigation and also recharge the groundwater table, especially in the

northern region.

Some experts have observed that the excavated canals may again be filled up during the monsoon if proper methods are not followed for excavation.

Regarding this, the minister said three agencies -- Institute of Water Modelling (IWM), Centre for Environmental and Geographic Information Services (CEGIS), and Water Resources Planning Organisation (WARPO) -- are conducting surveys to determine the right methods for excavation and ways to properly link them with rivers to keep the water flow steady.

"We are also engaging union parishads and locals in the canal-digging programme to make it successful."

On curbing pollution in rivers and canals, especially those in and around Dhaka, the minister said the programme has the potential to spur a social movement against waste dumping in water bodies.

"We are having discussions with the World Bank, JICA [Japan International Cooperation Agency], and other development partners to implement a project to free the Buriganga from pollution."

The minister further said they would remove all illegal structures on canals and poorly planned culverts obstructing the natural flow of water.

Over the years, houses, shops, and markets have been built encroaching on many canals. Local influential people also put up barriers on canals for fish farming.

As the canal excavation drive continues, the authorities will dismantle all illegal structures and recover the encroached areas, Anee said.

"Some obstacles may arise, but we must overcome them," he said, adding that deputy commissioners and the relevant government agencies will take necessary steps in such cases.