

Bangladesh COVID-19 deaths soar past 500

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Yesterday, the number of COVID-19 deaths in Bangladesh rose to 582, with 42,844 confirmed cases, marking an accelerating spread of the pandemic. Over two days, the official death toll rose by 48 and the number of infections by about 4,500, or more than 10 percent.

Both curves are still rising and the real number of victims of the coronavirus must be much higher. Testing remains at very low levels. The health directorate conducted only 9,310 tests on Thursday, in a population of 162 million.

To make matters worse, five people died on Wednesday when a fire broke out in makeshift COVID-19 isolation center at the private United Hospital in the capital Dhaka. The patients, four men and one woman, were aged between 45 and 75.

The reason for the fire is not yet known. But it illustrates how the pandemic is straining the poor health infrastructure. A doctor at the hospital said: “We are already very stressed out at work and the fire only added to our headache.”

Despite the growing virus threat, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s Awami League government has refused to extend the nationwide lockdown after May 30, even while insisting that citizens must strictly abide by health guidelines.

Like its counterparts in other countries, the ruling elite is safeguarding the interests of big business, saying offices will be open, and just the sick, and pregnant women, can stay home.

Likewise, the government plans a “limited reopening” of public transport—buses, trains and ferries—despite it being impossible to follow health guidelines and adhere to social distancing in the notoriously over-crowded services.

While shops will be allowed to open from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., a ban on people’s movement from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m. will be strictly enforced, with violations treated as punishable offences. Public gatherings will remain banned.

Bangladesh has only 127,000 hospital beds, including

91,000 in government-run hospitals and 737 intensive care unit beds. A further surge in coronavirus cases will be catastrophic. The Hasina government’s request for hospitals to allocate at least 50 separate beds for virus-infected patients will be totally inadequate.

A calamitous situation is developing in the Rohingya refugee camps, where about one million people live without proper medical facilities. Twenty-nine positive COVID-19 cases had been reported in the camps by Tuesday, after the first case was confirmed on May 15. At least 15,000 refugees are under quarantine.

Entry and exit from the Cox’s Bazar district, where the refugees are camped, were prohibited from April 8 but that did not prevent the spread of the virus. Despite victims being placed in isolation blocks, the refugees are extremely vulnerable to the pandemic. In the desperately-overcrowded camps, with around 40,000 people living in each square kilometre, social distancing is impossible.

Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh to escape atrocities carried out by the Burmese military and Buddhist supremacist thugs. But the Dhaka government considers them an unbearable burden and provides meagre resources, including for education and health care.

The government says it is trying to scale up testing in the camps, which stood at only 188 a day by Tuesday. But the lack of facilities and protection gear means that aid workers themselves fear being infected, Al Jazeera reported.

Nay San Lwin, co-founder of the Free Rohingya Coalition, said there are not enough ICU beds and ventilators, not just for the refugees but also for the local community. Cox’s Bazar district is home to 3.4 million people, including refugees.

The government cut off internet access in the camps last September, resulting in lower awareness of the virus. Many of the refugees know little about how COVID-19 spreads, or how to prevent and contain it. The government cut off the internet to harass the Rohingyas into moving to the cyclone-prone remote Bhasan Char silt island.

COVID-19 has seriously impacted on the Bangladesh

economy, especially in the apparel sector. Desperately trying to maintain production and profits in this sector, Hasina has reopened garment facilities. Garments account for 84 percent of the country's \$US40 billion annual export earnings.

There is widespread anger among apparel workers over the unsafe working conditions, as well as job and pay cuts. In the latest protest, on May 22, hundreds of workers from 10 garment factories staged demonstrations demanding full April wages and other allowances. They gathered outside their factories in Gazipur, Ashulia and Dhaka, and blocked roads.

Since the pandemic erupted, Western countries have halted placing orders, causing revenue losses estimated at \$3 billion. More than 400 garment factories have remained closed for the past two months and nearly 100 have shut permanently.

With tensions rising between the US and China, the companies hope to get some of the orders that previously went to Beijing, and that employers from Japan, the US, Europe and South Korea will relocate their factories from China. Reportedly, at least 34 Japanese companies have shown interest in relocating to Bangladesh.

The Awami League government is racing against Vietnam, India and Indonesia to attract these companies and is therefore particularly desperate to reopen the economy. Another major factor in the economy, remittances from Bangladesh workers overseas, have dropped sharply since January because of the pandemic.

The Gulf countries and others are sacking migrant workers because of the economic fallout. Hasina's government plans to bring home 29,000 from the Middle East in several phases. But in Kuwait alone, thousands are detained in squalid and cramped facilities.



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