

# Measles outbreak in Bangladesh kills over 500 children

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A humanitarian catastrophe is unfolding in Bangladesh, as the South Asian country of 175 million people confronts a rapidly escalating measles outbreak that has killed hundreds of children since mid-March 2026.

Measles is a highly contagious, acute viral disease that affects individuals of all ages and remains one of the leading causes of death among young children globally.

As of Tuesday afternoon, the total death toll had risen to 555 after 10 more children died from measles and related symptoms, according to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) in Bangladesh.

The outbreak has struck young children hardest: around 80 percent of reported cases are among children under 5, particularly those under 2 and infants under 9 months old. Suspected measles cases stand at 66,023 (reported between March 15 and May 26, 2026).

The *Daily Star* on May 26 cited experts and DGHS officials who said “deaths may continue for several more days,” as around 4,000 children remain hospitalised.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has reported transmission in most of the country’s districts and warned of the risk of regional spread. WHO officials say the outbreak reflects accumulated immunity gaps, declining immunization coverage, and vaccine supply constraints. The catastrophe is rooted in decades of cuts and chronic under-investment in health care.

The worst transmission is concentrated in Dhaka Division and other densely populated urban areas, but cases have been recorded across most divisions.

UNICEF and WHO have emphasized that children who missed scheduled immunizations are the most vulnerable. The burden of illness and death has fallen overwhelmingly on working class and poor families.

Cox’s Bazar, home to more than 1.2 million Rohingya refugees, reportedly constitutes a particular vulnerability zone, as overcrowded conditions, malnutrition, and limited healthcare access have created an explosive transmission risk. Three-quarters of confirmed measles cases in the camps were among unvaccinated children.

Media accounts describe overcrowded facilities and families facing desperate choices. Many families have reportedly had to pay out of pocket for medicines, tests and private care when public hospitals lacked supplies or space.

Parents and relatives have been forced to travel from hospital to hospital because beds, treatment, and essential medicines were unavailable. “After coming to the [Dhaka] Children’s Hospital, we didn’t have any bed and waited without any treatment. Following hectic efforts, we [secured a place] and admitted my baby here,” one mother told TRT World. Her one-year-old child, Mohammad Anas, later died.

The World Bank reported in 2022 that 74 percent of total healthcare costs in Bangladesh are paid directly by households. The country allocates only around 0.67 percent of GDP to public health spending, placing it among the lowest levels in Asia and the world.

As a result, the health system is severely understaffed. Official figures show that more than one-third of government-approved posts, or tens of thousands of positions across various levels in the health sector are vacant. According to the WHO’s country profile for Bangladesh, in 2023 there were just 13.9 doctors, nurses and midwives per 10,000 people, well below the recommended number of 44.5 required to deliver basic services.

This disaster is unfolding under the newly elected right-wing Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led

government, which has just completed its first 100 days in power. The government of Prime Minister Tarique Rahman has sought to deflect responsibility, trading barbs with predecessors and blaming earlier administrations for gaps in health-care infrastructure.

Health Minister Sardar Md. Sakhawat Husain told the media that the government had taken “all possible steps,” from launching a “rapid” vaccination campaign to supplying ventilators to hospitals, to save lives. In fact, the government waited until April 5 to launch an emergency vaccination campaign, after dozens of people had already died.

The vaccination drive had reached more than 20 million children by May 25, according to the government. However, it is not clear how many have received both required doses. Minister Husain announced on May 3 that there was only 81 percent vaccine coverage among children—well below the 95 percent required to achieve herd immunity. Children are still dying almost every day.

Speaking to the *Daily Star* on May 26, Professor Benazir Ahmed, a former director of disease control, said the government’s delay in declaring an epidemic and treating it as a public health emergency had led to the high death toll. He said: “The government has already had enough time. They can no longer say they were new and could not properly assess the situation.”

The catastrophic measles outbreak is not the product of a single administration but the outcome of decades of chronic underfunding and negligence by successive governments.

The 2024-2026 interim government led by Muhammad Yunus bears immediate responsibility for ignoring repeated warnings and allowing immunisation coverage to collapse, accelerating the crisis. The previous Sheikh Hasina administration created conditions for the outbreak by failing to conduct the scheduled 2024 national measles campaign and permitting declining routine vaccination rates.

Bangladesh has experience in mounting large immunization campaigns. In 2014, the government implemented a nationwide measles-rubella campaign that vaccinated tens of millions of children, one of the largest such drives globally. Reported measles cases fell sharply in the subsequent years.

The present outbreak and mass deaths are the foreseeable result of the willful neglect of vaccination

programs in recent years, and more broadly the subordination of healthcare to the imperatives of private profit. The measles crisis comes on top of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which ripped through the population with minimal resources allocated to mitigate the spread of the disease. Bangladesh’s official COVID-19 figures record over two million confirmed cases and nearly 30,000 confirmed deaths since 2020—undoubtedly a major underestimate.

The BNP-led government, which took office after the February 12 parliamentary election, is continuing to work with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to impose pro-market restructuring and austerity measures, which will only deepen the public health crisis.

The measles epidemic, like the COVID pandemic, is not a natural disaster but a political and social one. The death and suffering of children from a preventable disease is an indictment of capitalism, a system that prioritises profits for the oligarchy over the health and lives of working people.

The working class must respond by taking up the fight for the socialist reorganization of society, in opposition to every capitalist party. The wealth being hoarded by the rich must be redistributed to fund free and accessible healthcare services for all, including universal vaccination and the elimination of preventable illnesses.



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