

Variant surge at border forces Bangladesh into new lockdown

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People leave for home with body of a relative at the Medical College Hospital in Rajshahi, 254 kilometers (158 miles) north of the capital, Dhaka, Bangladesh, June 15, 2021. Rajshahi has become one of the latest hotspots for the deadlier delta variant of the coronavirus. Bangladeshi authorities are increasingly becoming worried over the quick spread of coronavirus in about two dozen border districts close to India amid concern that the virus could devastate the crowded nation in coming weeks. Credit: AP Photo/Kabir Tuhin

In a state-run hospital near Bangladesh's border with India, Shahinul Islam prays his father does not become one of the facility's more than 300 patients who've died this month from the coronavirus.

Hundreds like his father are struggling to breathe in the COVID-19 treatment unit, while Islam waits in an emergency room packed with people. Relatives rush in and out, desperately trying to find oxygen cylinders for their loved ones.

The crowds of COVID-19 patients and worried kin are new scenes for the 1,200-bed Rajshahi Medical College Hospital, which serves border communities being overrun by the more infectious delta variant first detected in neighboring India.

Over 450 people with COVID-19 were admitted on Tuesday to the state-run hospital in Rajshahi district's main city.

Islam said his entire family has been shunned by people in his home village closer to the border. "The other villagers are afraid of us. They don't talk to us. When they see us on the road, they take a different path," he said. "We are suffering a lot," he added.

Rising infections and crowded hospitals are being seen across Bangladesh, where a stringent lockdown starts Thursday. The government will deploy military soldiers, paramilitary border officers and riot police to enforce the lockdown, set initially for one week. Authorities warn that the rapid surge in border areas is accelerating the virus' spread further into Bangladesh, and the increasing number of infections from the delta variant could devastate the South Asian nation of more than 160 million people.



A patient receives oxygen at the Medical College Hospital in Rajshahi, 254 kilometers (158 miles) north of the capital, Dhaka, Bangladesh, June 16, 2021. Rajshahi has become one of the latest hotspots for the deadlier delta variant of the coronavirus. Bangladeshi authorities are increasingly becoming worried over the quick spread of coronavirus in about two dozen border districts close to India amid concern that the virus could devastate the crowded nation in coming weeks. Credit: AP Photo/ Kabir Tuhin

"If people do not maintain health safety rules and if they do not stay at home, this wave of the pandemic in Bangladesh could be catastrophic. It spreads fast and it kills more people," said A.S.M. Alamgir, a chief scientific officer of the government's Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research in the capital, Dhaka.

Many border districts in northern and southwestern Bangladesh were spared from COVID-19 until now, so people lack antibodies against the

virus. That combined with the large numbers of unvaccinated people makes the population much more vulnerable.

Just over 4 million people are fully immunized. Another 1.5 million have received one dose, but the shortage of Oxford-AstraZeneca imports, halted by India, have left them uncertain when they'll get their second dose.

The Rajshahi hospital is also short of the type of oxygen supply system necessary for critical patients at a time when it's seeing more and more patients with worryingly low oxygen levels. High flow nasal cannula delivers steady continuous oxygen to such patients, but government hospitals in border districts have been forced to rely on portable oxygen cylinders instead.



A patient receives oxygen lying on a stretcher at the Medical College Hospital in

Rajshahi, 254 kilometers (158 miles) north of the capital, Dhaka, Bangladesh, June 16, 2021. Rajshahi has become one of the latest hotspots for the deadliest delta variant of the coronavirus. Bangladeshi authorities are increasingly becoming worried over the quick spread of coronavirus in about two dozen border districts close to India amid concern that the virus could devastate the crowded nation in coming weeks. Credit: AP Photo/ Kabir Tuhin

"They can't be managed properly with just oxygen cylinders. If we can't provide them with central oxygen line, God forbid, the casualties may increase," said Brig. Gen. Shamim Yazdani, director of the hospital.

Bangladesh's earlier virus outbreak caused infections and deaths to explode in crowded cities like the national capital Dhaka, but since late May, smaller towns and villages in the northern and southwestern border regions have become the major concern, said the scientist, Alamgir.

After the pandemic hit a devastating peak in April in India, Bangladesh shut the [border](#). Still, many travelled to and from India illegally, bringing with them new infections. The situation in India has now eased, but in Bangladesh, it has only escalated.

The South Asian nation has confirmed over 900,000 cases in total, including more than 14,000 deaths since March last year while experts say the actual figures could be more. On Monday, daily infections touched a record 8,364—almost double from last week, according to the health ministry. Sunday saw its highest reported deaths of the pandemic, 119, while another 112 people died Tuesday.



A patient, center, is assisted at the Medical College Hospital in Rajshahi, 254 kilometers (158 miles) north of the capital, Dhaka, Bangladesh, June 16 2021. Rajshahi has become one of the latest hotspots for the deadlier delta variant of the coronavirus. Bangladeshi authorities are increasingly becoming worried over the quick spread of coronavirus in about two dozen border districts close to India amid concern that the virus could devastate the crowded nation in coming weeks. Credit: AP Photo/ Kabir Tuhin



A patient is transported on a stretcher at the Medical College Hospital in Rajshahi, 254 kilometers (158 miles) north of the capital, Dhaka, Bangladesh, June 16, 2021. Rajshahi has become one of the latest hotspots for the deadlier delta variant of the coronavirus. Bangladeshi authorities are increasingly becoming worried over the quick spread of coronavirus in about two dozen border districts close to India amid concern that the virus could devastate the crowded nation in coming weeks. Credit: AP Photo/ Kabir Tuhin



People line up to receive ration without maintaining social distancing in Rajshahi, 254 kilometers (158 miles) north of the capital, Dhaka, Bangladesh, June 16, 2021. Rajshahi has become one of the latest hotspots for the deadlier delta variant of the coronavirus. Bangladeshi authorities are increasingly becoming worried over the quick spread of coronavirus in about two dozen border districts close to India amid concern that the virus could devastate the crowded nation in coming weeks. Credit: AP Photo/ Kabir Tuhin



A policeman stops commuters in Rajshahi, 254 kilometers (158 miles) north of the capital, Dhaka, Bangladesh, June 16, 2021. Rajshahi has become one of the latest hotspots for the deadlier delta variant of the coronavirus. Bangladeshi authorities are increasingly becoming worried over the quick spread of coronavirus in about two dozen border districts close to India amid concern that the virus could devastate the crowded nation in coming weeks. Credit: AP Photo/Kabir Tuhin



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A man assists a patient facing difficulties in breathing at the Medical College Hospital in Rajshahi, 254 kilometers (158 miles) north of the capital, Dhaka, Bangladesh, June 16, 2021. Rajshahi has become one of the latest hotspots for the deadlier delta variant of the coronavirus. Bangladeshi authorities are increasingly becoming worried over the quick spread of coronavirus in about two dozen border districts close to India amid concern that the virus could devastate the crowded nation in coming weeks. Credit: AP Photo/ Kabir Tuhin



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Experts are bracing for the situation to further worsen in the coming weeks. The country's [vaccine supply](#) got a slight boost with the recent arrival of another 1 million doses of China's Sinopharm vaccine, but it's still waiting on 20 million AstraZeneca doses already ordered from the Serum Institute of India. Without that order, mass vaccinations cannot begin.

The surging cases and vaccine uncertainties pushed Prime Minister

Sheikh Hasina's government to double down. Restrictions began in phases Monday before all economic activity is halted in a stringent nationwide lockdown starting Thursday.

In anticipation, thousands of people attempted to flee Dhaka since last weekend, crowding bus and ferry terminals while flouting public health measures like maintaining distance.

A complete lockdown may be the only answer to slow the variant, which poses the biggest risk yet. The government is also trying to procure more vaccines, said scientist Alamgir.

"If we can enforce the strict shutdown as planned, we will be able to avoid a disaster," he added. "Let's hope for the best."

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