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## Food Aid for The Poor: Smart cards for 1.25cr families

*Govt working to prepare database, plug loopholes to stop irregularities*

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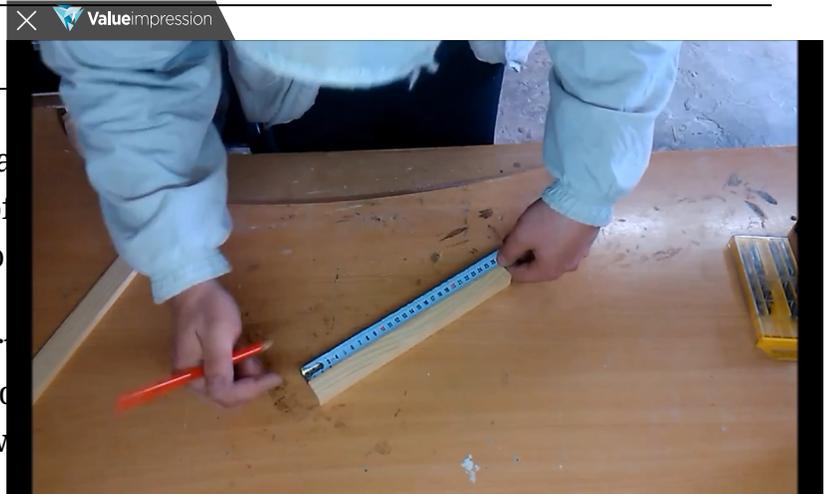
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Muhammad Zahidul Islam and Sohel Parvez

The government is working to develop a system to ensure proper distribution of food aid to 1.25 crore families, said officials at two meetings in Dhaka on Tuesday.

Each recipient would be handed a smart card, officials added, noting that the cards would be issued to 1.25 crore families among poor and low income families, with a view to ensuring proper distribution of food aid.



absence of income as the economy remains under severe strain for a month-long shutdown since March 26.

The database and the issuance of smart cards will help remove duplication, eliminate ghost lists and reduce corruption related to the government's safety net programs, said NM Zeaul Alam, senior secretary at Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Division under the Ministry of Posts, Telecommunications and Information Technology.

It is one of the two ministries that are working to develop the database to distribute the food aid in May and June, said the officials, adding that the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief was collecting information from other ministries such as the Ministry of Social Welfare in this regard.

Access to Information programme (a2i) under the ICT Division is helping develop the software for the database, they said.

The initiative comes at a time when the countrywide shutdown, enforced to fend off the coronavirus outbreak, has forced tens of thousands of people to remain half-fed or unfed and government officials are frequently seizing subsidised rice, meant for distribution among poor and low-income people, from the illegal possession of a section of local government representatives and members of the ruling Awami League.

Officials said an error-free database would eliminate the scope for irregularities in the beneficiary listing and distribution of aid.

Under the scheme, 49 lakh families getting Gratuitous Relief (GR) from the disaster management ministry, 50 lakh beneficiary from the food ministry's Food Friendly Program (FFP), 12.5 lakh recipients from the special Open Market Sales (OMS) programme would see their names in the database.

Also, 10.40 lakh beneficiaries of government's Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) programme, run by women and children affairs ministry, will be included in the database along with three lakh fishermen who get rice under the Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) programme, said a senior official of the disaster management ministry, seeking to remain unnamed.

Officials said families involving more than 5 crore people will be given cards to provide them with food assistance in May and June.

The amount of food to be given by the ministry to each family is yet to be finalised. It, however, estimates that it would need to provide 98,000 tonnes of rice to 49 lakh families



(20 kilograms each) in May and 97.91 lakh families in June under the GR programme. The whole GR operation in June is likely to require 2.18 lakh tonnes of rice, said officials.

Zeaul Alam said the government has a plan to develop a database and issue smart cards earlier. The Covid-19 lockdown and subsequent humanitarian aid has brought the issue of building the database faster.

"We expect that the database will be ready within next week," he said.

The database will contain National Identity (NID) number of recipients, their mobile phone numbers, address, the person's age and the number of family members so that all duplications and other irregularities can be avoided, said officials.

"If any beneficiary does not have that numbers, we will definitely include them but our target will be to incorporate as much as information as possible. The NID and mobile phone number are two main tools to identify a person," said Alam.

"We will not be rigid on NID and mobile number but we want to get the inputs from the regional offices."

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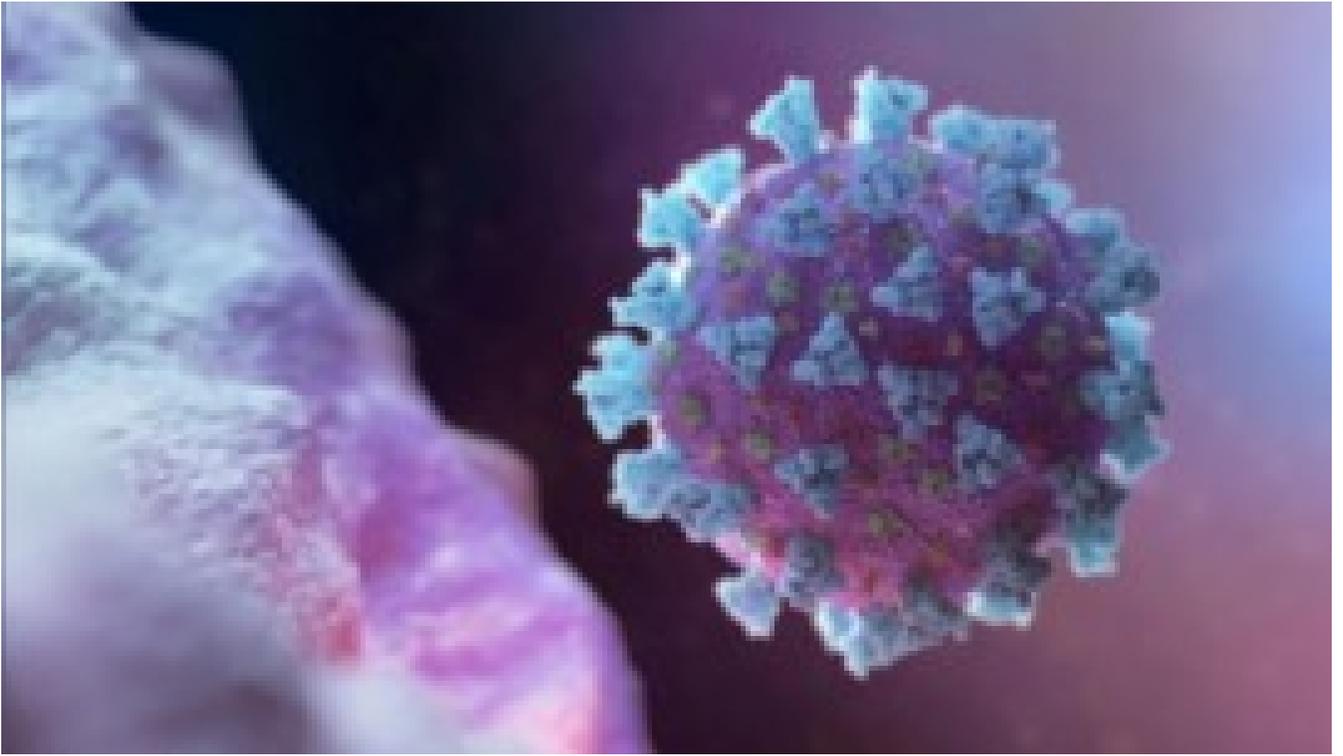
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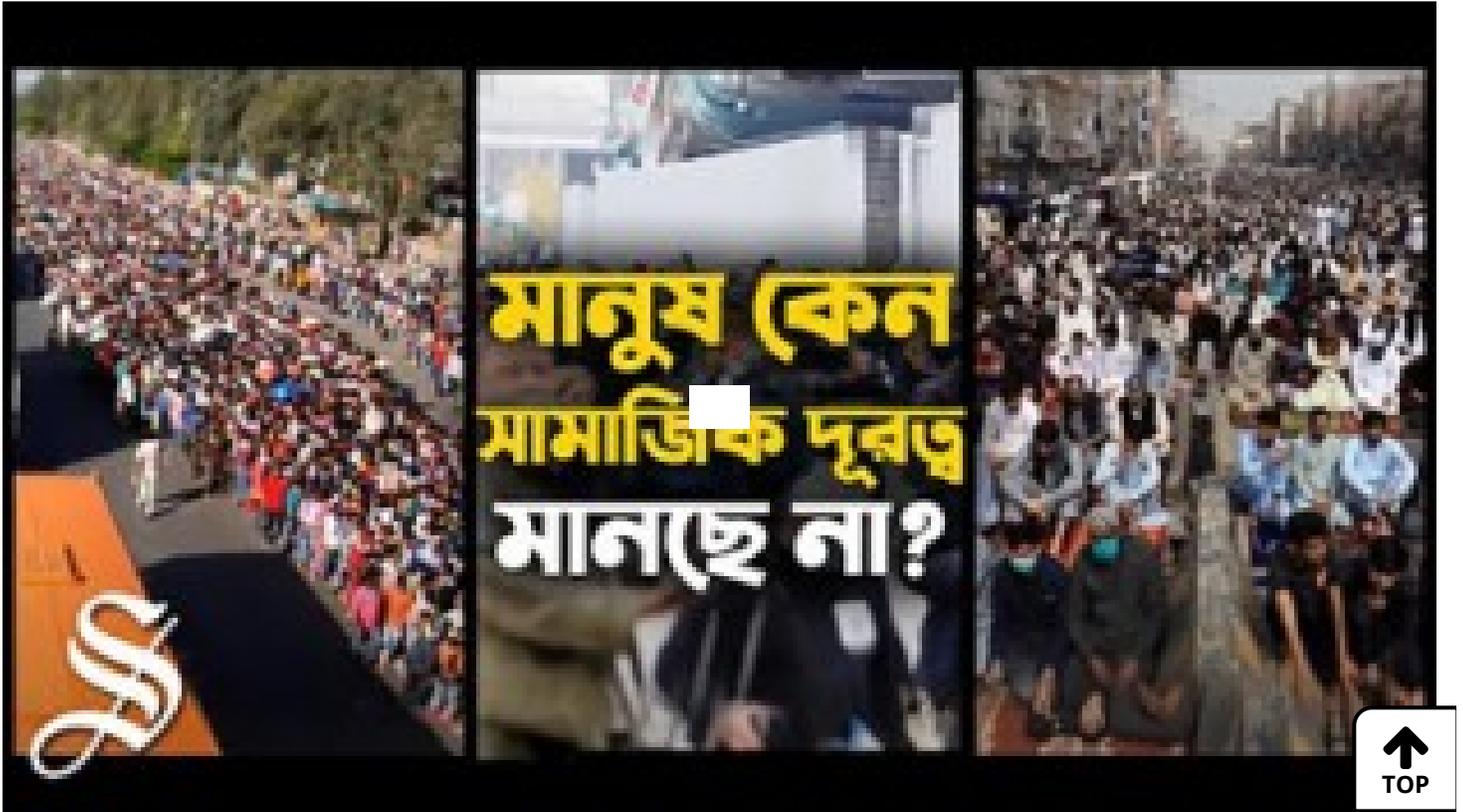


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