

EID-UL AZHA

Sacrificial animals pouring in, but prices very high

ANWAR ALI, Rajshahi

Nearly a week ahead of Eid-ul Azha, sacrificial animals started pouring into local markets but the prices are high and beyond the capacity of low-income groups in the North Bengal region.

The wholesale buyers from different parts of the country, including Dhaka, Chittagong, Sylhet, Barisal, Kushtia and Khulna are busy taking trucks of sacrificial animals to urban markets.

Most traders say they have invested heavily this year, as this is the election year. Many prospective candidates are likely to sacrifice a number of animals in respective electoral areas.

Abdus Salam, a trader from Barisal, told The Daily Star, that this year's business is better than last year as the price has increased about 20 per cent. "Excluding tax, we can earn a bit more than last year," he said.

Some traders said there has been a less inflow of cattle for Eid-ul-Azha this year as border guards of Bangladesh and India tightened security, pushing up prices.

They also identified extortion as reason saying intermediaries of police and Bangladesh Rifles

(BDR) had been taking toll at different points between Chapainawabganj and Natore as the cattle are being carried to Dhaka.

They said, many seasonal animal traders of India and Bangladesh are gathering cows at different border points in Rajshahi, Chapainawabganj and Naogaon expecting a brisk business.

Another trader said the markets are crowded with customers in the evening. Most cows come from India. Prices of small sized cow are ranging between Tk 12,000 and Tk 20,000 and price of a medium sized cow is between Tk 25,000 and 35,000 on an average.

The traders are demanding between Tk 80,000 and 150,000 for a large sized cow.

Goats are being sold at between Tk 5000 and Tk 10,000.

Siddik Pramanik, a trader of Gabtoli Hat of Dhaka, said he had to pay Tk 200 to the police in Rajshahi and Natore, and Tk 100 each at some other points.

Some BDR personnel are taking Tk 200 to Tk 1,000 from each truck of cattle at Kanshat in Chapainawabganj and Rajshahi, said Aminul Islam, another trader.

Deputy Inspector General of

Police in Rajshahi Range and Rajshahi Metropolitan Police Commissioners said they had beefed up security measures in every cattle market and at important points to ensure the safety of traders and buyers.

The cattle are mostly coming from the bordering points at Sona Mosque, Bulanpur, Sultanganj, Khanpur and through Padma river shoals in Rajshahi and Chapainawabganj, said sources. Poor people are carrying cows through smuggling risking their lives.

In such a situation, the traders in the border areas are demanding Tk 2,000 to Tk 4,000 more for each cow, said Mobarak Hossain, a wholesale buyer from Kushtia who is likely to take some 50 cows to Dhaka.

The middle and limited earning people are worried, as the prices of cattle have jumped to the double than previous years.

The major markets of this region include Damkura, Tebaria, Moukhara hats and hats at Paba, Mohonpur, Nawhata, Godagari, Mohisalbari, Rajabari, Kathakhali, Keshorehat, Tahirpur, Lalpur, Bagha and Banesarwar.

Release of BKL chief demanded

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh Krishak League (BKL) yesterday demanded immediate and unconditional release of its President Dr Mirza Jalil who was arrested on Thursday during the dawn-to-dusk hartal enforced by Awami League (AL)-led 14-party combine.

They also announced a country-wide demonstration for today and a human chain for tomorrow in the capital and threatened to lay siege to Bangabhaban if Jalil is not released by that time.

They were speaking at a rally in front of its central office at Bangabandhu Avenue in the city.

AL Presidium Members Abdur Razzak, Motia Chowdhury, Organising Secretary Abdul Mannan, Krishak League General Secretary Motahar Hossain Mollah and Srnamik League General Secretary Ray Ramesh Chandra also spoke at the rally.



Bangladesh Krishak League organises a rally at Bangabandhu Avenue in Dhaka yesterday in protest against the arrest of Krishak League President Mirza Jalil during Thursday's hartal.

BIRD FLU SPREADS Vietnam, UN to launch awareness campaign

AFP, Hanoi

Vietnam and the United Nations announced yesterday they will launch an awareness campaign on the risks posed by bird flu as the virus continues to spread in two southern provinces.

Additional cases of the deadly H5N1 virus were detected in Ca Mau and Bac Lieu provinces in the Mekong delta, with nearly 8,400 poultry dead or culled, the national animal health department said on its website.

The two provinces were the first to report major outbreaks of bird flu in the communist nation in the past year. The virus was identified in different locations in August, but only a small number of storks were said to have died.

The government and the UN announced the launch soon of an awareness campaign with TV and radio spots, communication kits, posters, leaflets and booklets, and a print media campaign.

'US-Syria talks key to ending Lebanon crisis'

AFP, Brussels

The United States must change policy and reach out to Syria if the crisis in Lebanon is to be resolved, according to the International Crisis Group think-tank.

"Washington's strategy of pressure, isolation and implicit threats of regime change has backfired," the Brussels-based group said in a policy review on Lebanon, adding to a growing chorus of calls for the US to engage Syria.

"Damascus has proved it may destabilise Lebanon if what it considers its vital interests are ignored or if it feels cornered. There can be no stable solution for Lebanon without a viable solution for Syria," it said.

But Washington accuses Syria of undermining Lebanon's fragile democracy by funding and training the militant group Hezbollah, and letting extremists into Iraq, and US President George W. Bush has dismissed calls for talks.

Syria was for decades the powerbroker in its smaller neighbour until public outcry over the February 2005 slaying of ex-premier Rafiq Hariri led to the exit of Syrian troops months later.

Asia urged to take more eco-friendly measures

AFP, Bangkok

The Asia-Pacific region, a global production centre, is exceeding its ecological capacity, the United Nations said Friday, calling on the region to take better environmental protection measures.

"As Asian economies develop, promoting more eco-efficient consumption pattern is now looming as a new challenge," the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (Unescap) said in a report.

"Meeting human development needs based on current 'grow first, clean up later' economic growth patterns is likely to result in growing ecological deficits," it said, adding the region's environment was at boiling point.

Led by China and India, the economy in the Asia-Pacific region is expected to grow by 6.9 percent in 2007, a slight decline from 7.1 percent seen in 2006, the Unescap

said earlier in a separate report.

But Friday's report called on the region to shift its economic policy toward "green growth" patterns that encourage resource-efficient production and better pollution controls.

"It is encouraging that the government of China announced six measures for green growth last May. Eco-efficiency should now be adopted as a new criterion for economic development planning for many developing countries in the region."

While calling for more eco-friendly measures, the UN said the region's economic growth remained vital to ease global poverty.

The report said nearly 670 million people in the region are living on less than one dollar per day and 665 million have no access to improved drinking water.

Schoolteacher donates Tk 20 lakh to AMCH fund

Bss, Dhaka

Habeeba Lopa Selim, a teacher of Sunbeams School in the city, yesterday donated Tk 20 lakh to Ahsania Mission Cancer Hospital (AMCH) fund.

A cheque for the amount was handed over to M Ehsanur Rahman, deputy executive director of Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM), a press release of AMCH said.

With the donation a five-bed ward of the hospital will be named after her two elder sisters Hanifa Ena Ahmed and Haleeda Lulu Mansoor who had died of cancer.

Her daughter Sahpar Selim was present on the occasion.

Thanking the donor, Rahman said one-fourth of the money required for the hospital has already been collected.

Construction of the fourth floor of the hospital is progressing fast, he said.

AFP, Colombo

Corruption and ethnic violence is blocking a flood of foreign aid for Sri Lanka's tsunami survivors two years after the massive disaster, according to official records and whistle-blowers.

President Mahinda Rajapakse admitted a year ago the country had failed to do enough to help the victims of the towering waves, but thousands of survivors still live in "tent villages" along the coast.

Sri Lanka, one of the worst hit by the December 2004 Asian tsunami, lost an estimated 31,000 people while another million were left homeless, but the island also attracted 3.2 billion dollars in foreign aid pledges.

Out of the promised aid, it was not clear how much was received, but the state auditor general in September 2005 noted out of 1.16 billion dollars committed, only 13.5 percent had actually been spent.

Since then, there has been no fresh government audit.

Whistle-blowers believe that only a fraction of the aid actually went to the real victims and in the absence of proper accounting, it has been virtually

impossible to track down what happened to the cash.

Official figures are often contradictory, but even the state admits only about half of the estimated 100,000 damaged or destroyed homes have been rebuilt as the country readies to mark the tragedy's second anniversary.

"God only knows if the money had been spent on tsunami victims or anybody else," says JC Weliamuna, Sri Lanka's executive director of the Transparency International, a global anti-corruption group.

"The government is now accusing non-governmental organisations for the slow progress and it's like the pot calling the kettle black," he said, adding there had been huge corruption in delivering aid.

He said both the state and the local and international charities, numbering nearly 400, were flooded with donations and they were overwhelmed by the unprecedented funding.

Weliamuna said many NGOs wasted the money.

Aid workers paid themselves three times what their counterparts were getting in Sri Lanka's better-paid private sector and lavished on

sports utility vehicles and homes in the best areas of the country, according to officials.

"We know that extremely high salaries, several times the going rate, had been paid," Weliamuna said. "It was even worse when it came to rents and raw materials and that is partly because of the sudden surge in demand."

Reconstruction in the worst affected area of the island's north-east suffered a double blow with the escalation of fighting between government troops and Tamil Tiger rebels since early this year.

Much of the damage was in the northern and eastern regions, some of which are controlled by Tiger rebels. Efforts by peacebrokers to get Colombo and the Tigers to work together last year ended in failure, leading the way for more bloodshed.

The government's relief coordinating agency, the RADA (Reconstruction and Development Agency) said in a mid-year report that fighting in the region posed a problem, but called for speedy work at least in other areas.

"The recovery process is making positive progress, but the complex security situation in the

North-East may reduce the impact of ongoing interventions," RADA said.

"As we progress, additional focus and concentration are needed for targeting legitimate beneficiaries, eliminating duplication, promoting beneficiary participation and empowerment, and ensuring accountability."

Graft busters say it is accountability that is lacking in the entire recovery effort and even some of the well established international organisations often overlooked good accounting practices.

Out of 70 organisations handling large-scale tsunami relief projects, only six responded to a call for a "value-for-money" audit commissioned by Transparency International.

The six included Japan Bank for International Cooperation and the Norwegian and Swedish charity FORUT while several others flatly refused to be audited or simply ignored the call for accountability.

Rukshana Nanayakkara, who conducted the audit, said they were unable to quantify corruption or wastage because proper documentation had not been maintained.



Habeeba Lopa Selim, a teacher of the Sunbeams School, hands over a cheque for Tk 20 lakh to Deputy Executive Director of Ahsania Mission Cancer Hospital (AMCH) M Ehsanur Rahman at the Mission office in Dhaka yesterday.

Dead star offers clues to the end of our solar system

AFP, Chicago

British astrophysicists said Thursday that they have found evidence of planetary material in the orbit of a white dwarf for the first time, a discovery that may provide clues to the end of our own solar system billions of years from now.

The team at Britain's Warwick University identified an unusual ring of metal-rich gas orbiting very close around a white dwarf, a former star, about 463 light years from our solar system in the constellation Virgo.

Their analysis of the traces of magnesium, iron and calcium seen in the ring suggests the materials are the evaporated remains of an asteroid about 50km in size, which got sucked into the orbit of the white dwarf and then gradually pulverised and irradiated.

"This is very direct evidence that white dwarfs have planetary systems around them," said Tom Marsh, professor of experimental

physics at Warwick University.

A white dwarf begins as a star similar to our sun. Late in life, the star swells into a red giant probably destroying any inner planets at orbits such as those of Mercury and Venus, and pushing out other planets and asteroids to a more distant orbit than before.

The star that mutated into this particular white dwarf, which has been dubbed SDSS 1228+1040, would have destroyed all planetary material out to a distance of 500 million miles.

But asteroids still exist today at larger distances from this white dwarf.

If as the astrophysicists suspect, this star was part of a planetary system with an asteroid belt, then it could serve as a model for what will happen to our own solar system in five to eight billion years when the sun becomes a white dwarf.

The suggestion is that our planets could collapse in this way in the distant future. "It's like a

glimpse into the future of our solar system," said Marsh.

The presence of the ring helps solve a problem for astronomers who, up till now, have been puzzled by the apparent absence of planets around white dwarfs.

But it also points up just how unusual our solar system is.

The Warwick University team studied data on 500 additional white dwarves without finding conclusive evidence for another system harbouring such a ring around it.

The rarity of such a ring made from a disrupted asteroid tells us that the majority of planetary systems may look quite different from our own solar system," the researchers wrote.

"They may not have asteroid belts at all, or not as far out as it is the case in the solar system, or they may not have planets at such great distances as Mars or Jupiter."