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Free seeds, fertiliser for 25 lakh farmers from Aug 15

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government will distribute seeds and fertilisers free of cost among 25 lakh small and marginal farmers against one bigha land from August 15 to help the flood-affected farmers go for cultivation immediately after the recession of floodwaters.

The floods have damaged agriculture on 8.30 lakh hectares in 46 districts and 295 upazilas, affecting 46.50 lakh farmers and making the farm sector count as much as Tk 1,780 crore in losses, according to an estimate of the agriculture ministry.

The ministry earlier decided to help rehabilitate 12 lakh small and marginal farmers. The government has earmarked Tk 130 crore for the programme and the Finance Division has released Tk 48 crore.

A meeting of the agriculture ministry yesterday presided over by Agriculture Minister MK Anwar took the decision in the wake of warnings by agriculture experts that the Aman

crop may be severely damaged if the farmers do not get seeds by this month.

The experts also warned if further floods take place in the middle of the month, entire Aman crop will be destroyed. In that case, they suggested, the government should have a contingency plan in place. The experts asked the ministry to closely monitor the seed and fertilisers distribution among the farmers making sure that no irregularities take place.

State Minister for Agriculture Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir, Finance Secretary Zakir Ahmed Khan, Agriculture Secretary ASM Abdul Halim and chiefs of the departments under the ministry attended the meeting.

The vice-chancellors of the agriculture universities and agriculture experts were invited at the meeting for their opinions on the government's agricultural rehabilitation programme.

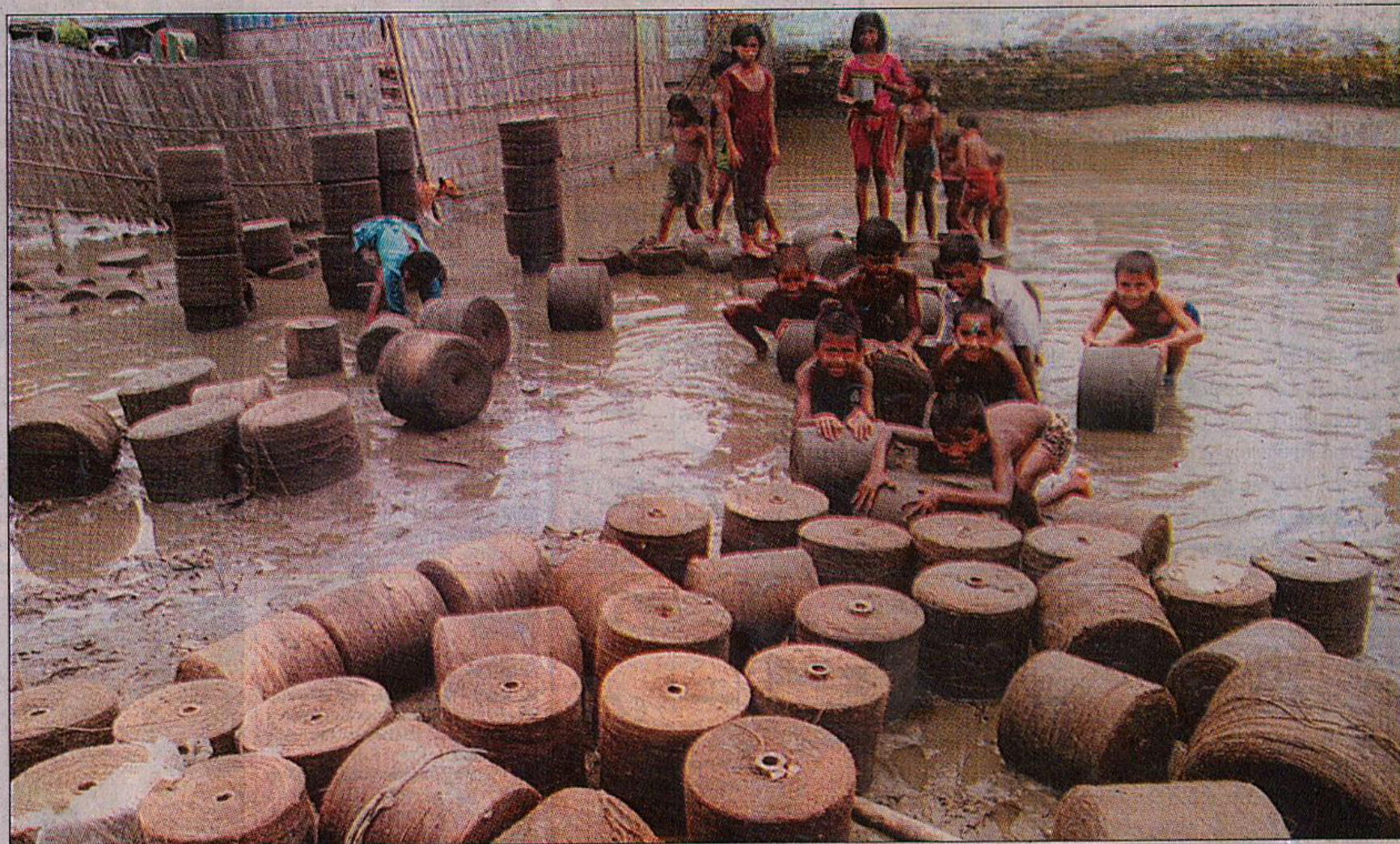
Emerging from the meeting, Anwar told reporters they have sufficient stock of seeds and if needs be, the government will go for import. He added they would know the status of the seeds in stock by August 15.

The minister said they are testing the quality of the seeds and the testing would be complete by that time.

Anwar said the government would distribute the seeds and fertilisers through the rehabilitation committees at the districts, upazilas and unions. The district and upazila administrations will monitor the operations of the rehabilitation committees, he added.

The agriculture secretary has sent letters to the district administrations asking them to monitor and extend support to the distribution process, the minister said.

The meeting was told joint secretaries have been sent to the flood-hit districts to keep a close eye on the distribution.



Children play with jute-thread rolls damaged by the flooding at Kadamtala in Keraniganj on the outskirts of the capital yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

1.1 lakh hit by diarrhoea since mid-July

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Diarrhoea continues to attack people in the flood-hit areas bringing the tally of the sufferers to about 1.1 lakh with 58 deaths since mid July.

Official figures recorded at the health directorate indicate that the current diarrhoea outbreak has not yet reached an epidemic stage, although experts describe the unusual outbreak of the waterborne disease as alarming. Considering the rate of the attacks, it is an epidemic, which the government tends to hide, they say.

Referring to statistics, Prof Mizanur Rahman, director general of health services, said, "The number of people so far affected by

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HIV epidemic hits vein drug takers

Common man no longer safe, say experts

NAIMUL HAQ

The HIV is spreading in epidemic proportions among a vulnerable group, posing serious threat to the common man, a survey of the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Diseases Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR'B) to be launched soon said.

The 'Fifth Round Second Generation Surveillance' survey says the virulent virus that causes Aids has crossed the borderline of 5 percent and hit a dangerous 8.9 percent mark among intravenous drug users, up from 4 percent in

2002.

According to the United Nations' method of gauging Aids risk, if the virus is found among more than 5 percent of a vulnerable group, it is considered that the society is facing an Aids epidemic.

"It clearly shows the general population is no longer safe," an expert said.

The spread of the disease among other high-risk groups -- commercial sex workers, drug users, truckers, rickshawpullers and migrant workers -- was also on significant rise.

"The message is clear and loud," another expert said, adding, "The figures send an alarm and call for real action."

The study, based on blood tests of 10,445 people from high-risk groups, however found less than one percent respondents positive for HIV infection indicating that Bangladesh was still a low prevalence nation.

The study showed low prevalence of HIV among hermaphrodites, male sex workers and heroin addicts.

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UN global aid appeal likely Wednesday

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The United Nations (UN) is likely to make a global appeal on Wednesday for assistance to 30 million flood-blighted people for the next six months, while the government announced it would launch its own appeal later.

The World Food Programme (WFP) will not launch its global appeal for emergency food aid today and has pushed it back to later in the week for further incorporation of numerous assessment and planning decisions.

A four-member UN team, led by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Resident Representative Jorgen Lissner,

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Bomb spectre haunts Sylhet

Intelligence agents examine Islamist militant link, AL leader used the bombed car

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Sylhet

Fear and shock gripped Sylhet yesterday, a day after a car bomb killed Awami League (AL) leader Mohammad Ibrahim and injured 30 others in the latest of 14 major explosions in seven years in the northeastern holy city.

The explosion, 47 hours after

twin cinema blasts that also killed a young man on Thursday, turned the city, rich with the memories of Islamic saints, into a virtual ghost town as police sifted through the wreckage for clues to the crime.

Intelligence agents were examining the probable link of Islamist outfits to the crime, as Sylhet Mayor

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Hasina accuses govt high-ups of Sylhet blast

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Opposition Leader and Awami League (AL) President Sheikh Hasina yesterday alleged the government high-ups are involved in Saturday's blast in Sylhet, saying it was a planned attempt to kill the city mayor, also an AL leader.

"The attack on Sylhet City Mayor and AL leader Hadaruddin Ahmed Kamran was part of the BNP-Jamaat-led coalition government's plan to kill all prospective leaders of the party across the country," said Hasina in a statement.

She said AL legislator Ahsanullah Master, former lawmaker Mamtaz Uddin, member of the party's advisory committee Manjurul Imam and

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Double murder in Shyampur

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Unidentified gunmen shot dead a trader and his manager and injured two pedestrians in Shyampur yesterday.

The deceased were identified as AKM Mejbah Uddin Ahmed, 32, owner of a construction materials store, and his manager Zakir Hossain Dewan, 26.

They were working in front of the store, only 60 metre off Mejbah's house, when a gang opened fire on them at around 8:15am.

On hearing gunshots, locals rushed to the scene to see the killers fleeing. They found Mejbah with six bullets while Zakir with 11 lying dead.

Abdus Samad, 60, a kitchen utensil seller, and an unknown youth who were passing by the area sustained bullet wounds.

"I heard about 100 gunshots and it was like a gun battle going on here," said victim's brother AKM Jashim Uddin Ahmed.

He took Mejbah and Zakir to

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Traffic negotiates the pothole-strewn road No. 27 K in Banani yesterday as the floodwaters have left roads in the capital severely damaged.

PHOTO: STAR

PM promises flood victims jobs, food

UNB, Khaliquri, Netrakona

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia yesterday assured flood victims of food and jobs under massive relief and rehabilitation operation in the disaster-affected areas across the country.

She said relief supplies are now being provided in a fair away while extensive rehabilitation works would be started after the recession of floodwaters as well as completion of the assessment of losses and damage caused by the devastating floods.

"The post-flood rehabilitation works would create huge employment opportunities for many people in the flood-ravaged areas which would help people financially," the prime minister said.

She briefly addressed two spontaneous public gatherings, particularly of flood-stricken people, at Shaligha Gopal Gopinath High School ground at Khaliquri and at

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Police to probe all Rab custodial deaths

Battalion chief says the guilty will be punished

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The police will investigate deaths in the custody of Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) and the guilty will be punished, Rab chief Anwarul Iqbal said yesterday.

"If autopsy or forensic reports show the people were killed in custody, unnatural death (UD) cases will be turned into murder cases," Iqbal, director general (DG) of Rab, told reporters in the Rab headquarters in Uttara.

Seven people, including Sumon, a witness to the killing of Awami League lawmaker Ahsanullah Master, have died in Rab custody or after arrest, prompting sharp reactions from people. Ain O Salish Kendro, a non-governmental legal aid watchdog, put the number of deaths in Rab custody at nine.

The meeting came two days after 'Pichchi' Hannan who figured on the police list of top 23 criminals died in 'crossfire' between a gang and Rab members in Savar early Friday.

The Rab DG at his first formal meeting with newsmen since its launch on March 26 said the elite anticrime force modelled on the concept of the US Federal Bureau of Investigation is armed with the latest training and logistics.

Rab, fashioned out of an amendment to rules and regulations of the Armed Police Battalion, has the authority of investigating cases on an order from the home ministry, said Iqbal, also an additional inspector general of police. "We will first investigate the cases and then arrest the accused."

The crime-combat force formed through a March 1 government order launched formal operations on June 21. Rab collects information and evidence before launching a drive against criminals, he said.

The force is staffed with 4,525 members of the 5,521 posts and 3,183 of them have trained in anti-crime combat, with the members drawn from six forces -- army, air force, navy, police, paramilitary

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Tk 1,600cr needed to repair city roads

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The city fathers need at least Tk 1,600 crore to repair the roads and interconnections damaged by floods in Dhaka and its suburbs, said Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) Mayor Sadek Hossain Khoka yesterday at a meeting.

Elaborating the urgency of the road repairs at the sixth meeting of Dhaka Transport Coordination Board (DTCB) in the city, the mayor said, "We already have requested the World Bank to provide us aid to carry

out the repairs and other post-flood rehabilitation. We hope their response will be positive."

The DTCB proposed to use the unspent money of Dhaka Urban Transport Project (DUTP), financed by the World Bank, for the post-flood rehabilitation and reconstruction work. Towards this end, the project period would be extended up to June 30, 2005 from the present deadline of December 30, 2004, the meeting resolved.

The WB representative to DTCB, Mohiuzzaman Quazi, said they

would consider the requests but advised the DUTP to go for long-term planning, besides solving the immediate problems.

The intersections most affected by flooding include Shapla Square, those on Road 41 and 37 in Gulshan, Green Road, Topkhana Road and Suhrawardi Avenue, and at Fakirapool, Kakrail, Rajarbagh and Malibagh.

The roads that are spoiled most include Jatrahari Road, Baridhara Park Road and Baridhara UN Road,

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South Asian regional meet on river link plan Aug 21

BSS, Dhaka

A two-day South Asian regional consultation on proposed river-linking project of India will begin on August 21 in the city.

Bangladesh People's Initiative against River Linking Project (BPIRL), a group of non-government organisations (NGOs) and professionals working on environment and social justice issues in Bangladesh, will organise the consultation to raise voice systematically against the river-linking

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EC commissioners get salary at last

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

At long last the office of the Comptroller General of Accounts (CGA) has released due salaries of the chief election commissioner (CEC) and three election commissioners on, what it said, humanitarian grounds.

The CGA on Saturday released thirteen months' salaries of the election commissioners, but did not give clearance to withdraw their pension amount.

In letters to the recipients, the CGA office that operates under the finance ministry said it had not yet

received the copy of the Supreme Court's order. It decided to release the salaries only out of humanitarian considerations.

"We're thinking of consulting our lawyers about the issue, as we are still not allowed to draw our pension amount," Election Commissioner M Munsef Ali told The Daily Star.

The Supreme Court on July 10 upholding the earlier High Court order declared the withholding of salaries illegal and directed the government to pay the dues to the election commissioners.

Since July last year salaries of the

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