

Costly start

FROM PAGE 1
rickshaw-vans.

Nearly four lakh rickshaws stayed off the road, as the owners and pullers enforced the strike to pressure the government to accept their six-point demand.

Drivers of CNG-run three-wheelers and taxis, which were also fewer than usual, took full advantage of the absence of rickshaws and charged fares higher than normal.

"This is ridiculous! We fasted all day, had to walk, then pay extra Tk 10 or more to get a CNG-run three-wheeler and now the high Iftar prices, is this a joke?" said Afrozi Sultana, an officer at a private firm who bought Iftar items on Bailey Road.

"I could not get a rickshaw like so many of us who were coming from Motijheel and I had to pay at least Tk 10 extra when hiring a CNG (-run three-wheeler), as so many people were waiting."

Some educational institutions even had to cancel scheduled examinations, as students would face much hardship due to the transportation problem.

GROCERY AND IF TAR PRICES

According to retailers of the kitchen markets in New Market, Hatirpool and Shantinagar, the prices increased by at least Tk 2-4 a kg and they blamed the price rise on their using motorised vehicles to transport goods from Karwan Bazar and Jatrabari wholesale markets.

The prices of aubergine shot up to Tk 80-90 a kg, potato to Tk 14-16, green chilli to Tk 120-140, tomato to Tk 70 from Tk 60 and cucumber from Tk 35 to 40 a kg.

"Since it cost us an additional Tk 60 to bring the goods from Karwan Bazar by CNG-run three-wheelers instead of a rickshaw-van, I had to increase the prices of all vegetables by at least two taka," said Nur Alam, a green retailer at Shantinagar Bazar.

Keeping pace with vegetables, the prices of Iftar items including fruits and spices yesterday jumped to an abnormal level, denting deep into the pockets of the middle-class.

The high prices sparked hard bargaining between consumers and vendors at roadside Iftar shops in the capital, with the vendors blaming it on the increased vegetable prices and manipulation by wholesalers.

For the consumers the prices of Iftar items this year are almost twice the previous year's.

The prices of other Iftar items such as various categories of dates ranged between Tk 50 and Tk 250 a kg yesterday against Tk 40 to Tk 150 previously. Fried gram was selling at Tk 60 to 80 a kg against Tk 40 last year.

People looked for Beguni, a popular item prepared from aubergine, in the shops but they could hardly afford it as the prices of aubergine rose to Tk 80 a kg in the kitchen markets. Vendors were selling Beguni at Tk 4 to 6 a piece, which was only Tk 2 last year.

Khorshed Alam, an Iftar buyer in front of Sukrabad bus stoppage, said, "I have not seen such high prices of Iftar items in 25 years of my life."

Piaju was selling at Tk 2 to 3 each,

potato chop Tk 2 to 4, Halim at Tk 200 to 250 a kg, puffed rice at Tk 32 a kg, Jilapi at Tk 60 to 120 a kg, Bundia at Tk 80 to 160 a kg, cucumber at Tk 60 a kg, tomato at Tk 60 a kg, date 60 to 220 a kg and Tikia at Tk 4 to 10 apiece.

Middle-class workers, like Minhaz Abedin, a third-grade government employee, believe they have to bear the brunt of the spiralling prices, as they do not earn enough to cope with the sky-high Iftar and grocery prices.

"It is impossible to meet everyday family needs with my little income as the prices of vegetables and Iftar items have now spiralled out of control," Abedin lamented. "Maybe I will have to cut my Eid-shopping budget to cope with the rising prices during Ramadan."

Sellers of Iftar items, too, placed the blame onto the wholesalers. "We have no option but to charge higher prices this time, as the vegetable prices, main ingredients for Iftar items, are now at a record high. Wholesalers charge us high prices and we pass it on to consumers," said Solaiman Mia, an Iftar-vendor near Panthapath.

Shahrin Akter, an NGO worker, said, "I have bought some Iftar items, but was surprised to find that the vendor used papaya instead of aubergine in Beguni and mixed radish with onion for preparing Piaju."

"I am having great difficulty to prepare a good dish for Iftar or Sehri as the prices of essential items are too high this year," she continued. "I don't know how people are bearing family expenditure. My husband and I earn over Tk 15,000 a month, still the amount proves inadequate," Shrin added.

The prices of fruits also increased Tk 10 to 20 a kg on average in the retail market. Apple prices yesterday jumped to Tk 80 to 120 from Tk 60 a kg a few days back, malta was selling at Tk 80 against Tk 60 last week, Naspati at Tk 80 against Tk 70 earlier and a green coconut at Tk 15 against Tk 10 last week.

Mob beats

FROM PAGE 1

Sayem, however, narrowly escaped the attack and informed the family members and local people of the incident. They recovered Delwar in critical condition and took him to Sher-e-Bangla Medical College Hospital where he died at about 12:30am.

Before death, Delwar named his attackers as Selim Molla, a Union Parishad (UP) member, Nadu, Kala Babul, Liton and their accomplices to police and his relatives. Kotwali police and members of the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) raided different parts of the city to nab the killers.

Mizanur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Kotwali Police Station, said there were more than a dozen cases against Kala Babul and Liton. Special forces were deployed in the area to control the situation.

Delwar's brother filed a murder case. Police made a general diary entry regarding the lynching of the two.



PHOTO: STAR

An army personnel stands guard at the Fakirerpool water pump in Dhaka yesterday. The government has deployed army in all pumps in the capital to ensure uninterrupted water supply during Ramadan.

No probe 54 days into grenade

FROM PAGE 1

The probe into the grenade recovery seems a failure like the one to track down the culprits behind the August 21 incident with government officials saying they found no clue to stealing the grenade into the jail so far.

Intelligence and police sources however said different agencies gave some 'alarming information' while probing the incident but the government does not want to reveal them. "At this moment, I will not say whether we found anything or not," State Minister for Home Lutfozzaman Babar told The Daily Star yesterday.

Asked whether the government is continuing the probe to unearth the mystery behind the incident, Babar said, "Definitely. We are investigating the matter separately alongside the probe into the August 21 grenade attack."

Some investigators say a successful probe into the grenade recovery inside the jail might help the law enforcers to track down the attackers on the AL rally.

Government indifference to point finger at people who took the grenade inside the jail shows how sensitive the 'findings' are, a senior police official said on condition of anonymity. "The culprits seem to be very powerful."

Since the grenade recovery, recently transferred Inspector General (Prisons) Brigadier General Zillur Rahman told the media it might have been thrown from outside over the boundary wall of the jail and that there was little chance of taking it in through the entrance of the jail.

"A probe team led by a deputy inspector general could not reach any conclusion but it believed the grenade was thrown from outside and the jail staffs had nothing to do with it," he told The Daily Star on Wednesday.

Zillur however said, "We don't rule out other possibilities."

Asked why some jail staffs were punished for neglect of duties following recovery of the grenade, he said, "They were punished on many charges, not only neglect of duty." He however declined to give details.

Eight jail staff, including the deputy jailer of the country's largest jail, were suspended within 48 hours of the grenade recovery and several others were suspended later.

But some sources in the jail and police said they have reasons to believe the grenade was taken through the entrance of the jail.

It was too difficult to throw the grenade 25 feet inside the jail compound over the 17-foot high boundary wall and another eight-foot high wall, some sources said. Circumstantial evidence suggested the grenade was taken through the jail entrance, the pointed out.

"Although the authorities claim of tight security including use of metal detector at the jail, carrying contraband items or explosives in is nothing difficult," an official source said, mentioning that two truckloads of contraband items including drugs were recovered in a search after the grenade recovery.

2 shot dead

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

Unknown assailants shot and knifed two people to death in Chuadanga and Meherpur Friday.

Police said criminals dragged Abdul Khaleque, 34, away from his house in Alamdanga upazila in Chuadanga and killed him around midnight.

In Meherpur, assailants killed Azibar Rahman, 30, in Ashrafpur village under sadar upazila the same night.

Police recovered their bodies yesterday morning. They suspect outlawed Purbo Banglar Communist Party's Janajuddha faction might have killed them.

750 M16 ammo

FROM PAGE 1
presence, the sources added.

Naikhangchhari has become a haven for arms traffickers. Two US arms specialists visited the area in February in the wake of seizure of huge arms and ammunition.

As many as 536 grenades, 32 anti-tank mines, seven anti-personnel mines and six 40mm rocket launchers were seized from Naikhongchhari since August last year.

Top ministries

FROM PAGE 1
put bids of their favoured contractors in refrigerators until a few minutes before lottery and would pick the cold papers to help them win the lottery.

But some ministries are lobbying the planning ministry for reintroduction of the lottery system.

Under the new provision, advertisements inviting bids against tenders have to be published in at least two widely circulated national dailies and the ministries and departments concerned, instead of the Department of Films and Publications (DFF), are to put the adverts on the newspapers. Donors also put pressure on the government to implement the provision.

However, the provision is still to be put into force because of a legal tangle.

Previously, the DFF would put advertisements only a few days before the deadline in little known and shady dailies, leaving little scope for competitive bidding. The new regulations have already incorporated necessary changes to

Although prohibited, giving food to prisoners from outside is a regular phenomenon, said the source. "One can easily take a 350-400gm explosive device in rice boxes as food items are not always checked strictly."

"We've failed to reach any conclusion but we are convinced the grenade was taken in to execute a conspiracy, and some prisoners may have been involved in it. The suspects include some prisoners in the Bangabandhu Murder case and Jail Killing case, the source said seeking anonymity.

"We are also checking whether the absconding accused in the cases, who are believed to be living abroad but visit Bangladesh secretly, are involved in the conspiracy," he said.

Asked about many of the law enforcers' hunches that the August 21 and August 22 incidents have links, Babar said, "We're checking it too."

Officer-in-Charge of Lalbagh Police Station Ghulam Mustafa said, "Two of our sub-inspectors are probing the grenade recovery incident in the jail and will continue it till the mystery is unearthed."

A top police official said, "A joint team of experts from army, Rapid Action Battalion, police and five intelligence agencies should search every inch of the jail to find out whether there are more grenades or other arms and explosives there."

Babar said a thorough search was conducted in the jail immediately after the grenade recovery.

plug loopholes in public procurement, including in tenders.

The planning ministry also put in place a Central Procurement Technical Unit to enforce compliance with the regulations. The Finance Division last month delegated financial powers to relevant officials of autonomous and semi-autonomous bodies, corporations in the public sector for completion of public works, purchase and signing and approving agreements relating to consultancy services.

The Finance Division also delegated financial powers for revenue and development expenditures under the procurement regulations.

Officials at the planning ministry said they would review the status of compliance with the new measures on a yearly basis.

The ministry last week also issued a circular styled, Public Procurement Processing and Approval Procedures, spelling out in timeframes for completion of procurements.

Protest over damage of idol of Durga

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Rajshahi

Unidentified elements damaged the idols of goddess Durga at a temple and a house in Kamargaon union of Tanore upazila on Friday night, triggering massive protests by the Hindus.

They demonstrated in front of the upazila nirbahi officer's (UNO) office and Tanore Police Station yesterday, demanding immediate arrest of the culprits.

They will refrain from celebrating their greatest festival - Durga Puja - if the miscreants are not brought to book, they said.

The gang burst into Parossya Durga Temple at Kamargaon and the idols of night when the caretakers and idol makers were asleep. They damaged the idol of Durga and other idols, mostly by breaking their heads. Later, they went to nearby Durgapur village, damaged some idols of Durga kept on the premises of the house of Sukesh Kumar Pramanik and fled, sources said.

UNO Abdul Mannan and upazila Puja Udjapan Committee President Narayan Chandra Biswas visited the spots and asked local people to help maintain a congenial atmosphere.

Mannan told newsmen security was beefed up following the incident and police were asked to nab the culprits as soon as possible. "No-one has seen the attackers," he said.

Ramkomol Saha, a representative of Parossya Temple, filed a case without accusing anyone.

Flood-hit

FROM PAGE 12

seven more villages of Sonadanga union during the last 24 hours.

Hundreds of flood-affected people took shelter in the UP building, Nasirgonj College and different school buildings.

Road communication between most of the villages of Govindapara, Naradas, Kachari-Koalipara, Basupara Auchpara, Jhikra, Dippur, Jugipara and Ganipur unions and upazila sadar remains cut off due to damaged roads.

Auchpara Union Parishad Chairman Ziaul Islam told reporters that gushing water damaged three bridges at Bamonigram, Khujipur and Neemtala. Hundreds of villagers there are now marooned.

Subol Moni Bose, upazila nirbahi officer of Bagmara, said no relief goods were allocated for the flood affected people of the upazila.

Meanwhile, flood situation at Raighati, Ghasiagram unions and Keshorhat municipal area in Mohonpur upazila has turned critical.

Sources said rivers Barnoi, Gur, Atrai, Chhoto Jamuna are overflowing, following onrush of water from upstream across the border.

The river protection embankment at Tengra and Atrai has been washed away flooding vast areas in Mohonpur, said Upazila Nirbahi Officer AHM Golam Kibria.

Floodwater has caused serious damage to crops and betel leaf and vegetable gardens at Dhurai, Baksimol, Mohongoni, Mougachi and Jahanabad unions, he said.

Flood situation in Naogaon town remained static with most of the houses under floodwater while the situation in nine upazilas deteriorated during the last 24 hours.

About 100 feet embankment at Enayetpur of Badalagachi upazila along the river Chhoto Jamuna breached, inundating vast areas.

The Chhoto Jamuna was flowing 95 centimetres above the danger level.

District relief office said Tk 56,000 and 50 metric tons of rice have been allocated for the flood affected people.

Forestland

FROM PAGE 1

under Dhaka zone either through lease or permanent arrangements, official sources said.

The army took 1,126 acres and air force 392 acres between 1966 and 1988 for various defence installations.

According to officials of the Ministry of Environment and Forest, the three services and paramilitary Bangladesh Rifles have already taken 2282.73 acres of forestland across the country and recently sought about 500 acres more.

Official figures show Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute has secured 52 acres, Bangladesh Shipa Unnayan Sangstha six acres, Bangladesh Railway 33 acres, Roads and Highways Department 14 acres, Bangladesh Betar 334 acres, Police Department five acres, Central Jail at Kashimpur 19.46 acres, Talibabad Satellite Station 123 acres, National Scouts 8.61 acres and Girls Guide 14 acres.

Besides, GK Enterprise has taken 1.96 acres, Medicinal Plant Centre 4.50 acres, Green House Organic Farm and Orion Mushrooms Ltd 23.75 acres, Begum Jashimuddin three acres and Shamim Thakur 2.40 acres.

The forest department has so far filed 170 cases against land grabbers in Dhaka zone, which are still to be disposed of.

But sources pointed out the department merely files cases but hardly make serious efforts to recover illegally occupied land.

Environment and Forest Minister Tariqul Islam at a meeting of forest officials recently said he had received reports that dishonest officials advised land grabbers to file cases against each other, through some 'understanding', claiming ownership of forestland and in several cases such fake claimants managed to get the land.

US troops in Iraq

FROM PAGE 12

on a fuel-hauling convoy to Taji, north of Baghdad. "We had broken down trucks, non-armored vehicles and, um, we were carrying contaminated fuel. They are holding us against our will. We are now prisoners," she said.

Hill said she was later contacted by Spc. Tammy Reese in Iraq, who was calling families of the soldiers.

"She told me (Amber) was being held in a tent with armed guards," said Hill, who spoke with her daughter Friday afternoon after her release. Her daughter said they are facing punishment ranging from a reprimand to a charge of mutiny.

The incident was first reported Friday by The Clarion-Ledger newspaper in Jackson, Miss. Family members told the newspaper that several platoon members had been confined.

A commanding general has ordered the unit to undergo a "safety-maintenance stand down," during which it will conduct no further missions as the unit's vehicles are inspected, the military said.

On Wednesday, 19 members of the platoon did not show up for a scheduled 7 a.m. meeting in Tallil, in southeastern Iraq, to prepare for the fuel convoy's departure a few hours later, the military statement said.

"An initial report indicated that some of the 19 soldiers (not all) refused to participate in the convoy as directed," the statement said.

The mission was ultimately carried out by other soldiers from the 343rd, which has at least 120 soldiers, the military said.

Staff Sgt. Christopher Stokes, a 37-year-old chemical engineer from Charlotte, New Carolina, went to Iraq with the 343rd but had to come home because of an injury. He said reservists were given inferior equipment and tensions in the company had been building since they were deployed in February.

"It wasn't really safe," he said. "The vehicles are not all that up to par anyway. The armor that they have is homemade. It's not really armor. It's like little steel rails."

A whole unit refusing to go on a mission in a war zone would be a significant breach of military discipline. The military statement said the incident "isolated" and called the 343rd an experienced unit that performed honorable service in nine months in Iraq.

US military officials said the commanding general of the 13th Corps Support Command., Brig. Gen. James E. Chambers, had appointed his deputy, Col. Darrell Roll, to investigate. An investigative team under Roll is in Tallil, questioning soldiers about the incident, the military said.

"Preliminary findings indicate that there were several contributing factors that led to the late convoy

incident and alleged refusal to participate by some soldiers," the military said. "It would be inappropriate to discuss those factors while the investigation continues."

Separately, the commander of the 300th Area Support Group, listed on a military Web site as Col. Pamela Adams, has ordered a criminal inquiry to determine if any soldiers committed crimes under the Uniform Code of Military Justice, and, if so, whether disciplinary measures are warranted.

The platoon has troops from Alabama, Kentucky, North Carolina, Mississippi and South Carolina, said Hill.

Congress retains power in Maharashtra

AFP, Mumbai

India's Congress-led alliance held onto power in the nation's richest state, Maharashtra, after winning the most seats yesterday in assembly elections and dealing a humiliating defeat to the opposition Hindu nationalists.

The results were seen as the first verdict on the popularity of the national left-backed Congress government, which took office in May after the shock poll ouster of the Hindu nationalist-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) coalition.

Preliminary election commission figures showed the Congress-National Congress Party (NCP) alliance swept 140 of Maharashtra's 288 constituencies while the opposition Hindu nationalist Shiv Sena-Bharatiya Janata Party alliance had won 119. Independents grabbed the remaining 29 seats.

"It's very clear now that Congress-NCP will form the next state government," said political analyst Raju Parulekar.

Party workers and supporters of the Congress-NCP alliance feted the win, bursting crackers in celebration across Maharashtra, home to Bombay, the nation's financial and entertainment capital.

The winner needed at least 145 of the 288 seats to form a government in Maharashtra, India's second most populous state with nearly 100 million people.

But analysts said victory was well within Congress's grasp as it could draw on the support of independent allies.

Analysts said Congress President Sonia Gandhi's last-minute whirlwind visit to Mumbai and Prime Minister's Manmohan Singh's rallies in rural Maharashtra tilted the balance in the Congress-NCP's favour.

Rickshaw strike

FROM PAGE 12

The demands include stopping seizure of rickshaws until renewal of licence, creating alternative job opportunity for rickshawpullers, withdrawal of the restriction on plying rickshaws on ten city roads and providing the rickshawpullers with driving licences.

The rickshaw strike came against the backdrop of a drive to seize unlicensed rickshaws during the Traffic Week that ended on Friday. The police seized some 350 illegal rickshaws from the city on Thursday and Friday. "The drive will continue," said Ansaruddin Khan Pathan, deputy commissioner of DMP (Traffic, South).

Schoolchildren, their parents and office-goers suffered the most as they found no rickshaws on the streets. Opportunist cab and autorickshaw drivers charged much higher than metered fare and declined to take passengers for a short trip.

"It's like a hartal day...I found no transport to take my children to school," said Firoza Begum walking with two heavy schoolbags of her son and daughter in Dhamondii. "I have to depend on rickshaws to take my kids to school."

Shamima Akhtar, an employee of a private firm, said, "I could not reach the office in time as I had to walk two kilometres to the nearest bus stand from my Senpara house."

In absence of rickshaws, most of the city roads were free from traffic congestion yesterday. Buses, minibuses and pick-ups ran overloaded on different routes of the city.

Sri Lanka

FROM PAGE 12

eight overs to wrap up victory for Sri Lanka.

Chandana was more expensive but picked up a couple of vital wickets as he claimed 3-56 off 10 overs.

Salman Butt top scored for Pakistan with 40, while Shoaib Malik managed 37.

Pakistan won the toss and must have been feeling confident when they had Sri Lanka 0-1 after the first over.

However, Sri Lanka captain Marvan Atapattu (66) combined with Sangakkara to put on 106 for the third wicket and give his side the upper hand.

Mahela Jayawardene (49) and Tillekeratne Dilshan (39) also weighed in, while Chaminda Vaas ended the innings with a flourish as he deposited the final delivery for six.

Kushtia outlaw

FROM PAGE 1

fire on policemen in Canalpara area. Police returned fire, leading to a gunfight between the two sides, police said.

"As Kasr tried to escape from police custody during the shootout, he was caught in the crossfire and suffered bullet wounds. He died on way to upazila health complex," they said.

Hailed from Srirampur village in the upazila, Kasr was said to be a cadre of Purba Banglar Communist Party (PBCP-Janajuddho). He formed his new Bahini two months ago.

He was wanted in a number of cases, including murder and robbery.