

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 Afrozai 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 IFTAR PRICES

According to retailers of the kitchen markets in New Market, Hatipool 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 chili 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 spicess 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."

Plaju 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 a piece.

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.

Shafin 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 mixed radish with onion for preparing Plaju."

"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," Shafin 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.

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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.

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Blasts hit Baghdad

FROM PAGE 12

A rocket struck the car park of the Mansour Melia hotel, where some foreign news organisations are based, damaging vehicles but causing no casualties.

Five churches were hit in a string of bomb attacks before dawn that were apparently meant to intimidate Iraq's small but deep-rooted Christian community, already shaken by a deadliest series of bombings of churches that killed 11 people in August.

A nightwatchman was jolted out of bed to find the St Runi church in the central Karada district had been gutted, its pillars reduced to ashes.

"This is no good. We live in fear," said Marlene Mikhail, 40, sitting in her home with crosses and icons on the walls.

Iraq's estimated 650,000 Christians make up about three percent of the population. Most are Chaldeans, Assyrians and Catholics.

The US military has accused its top enemy in Iraq, Jordanian militant Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, of carrying out bombings aimed at fueling sectarian strife and civil war.

US forces have intensified air strikes on suspected Zarqawi bases in Falluja, saying these are part of a drive to thwart attacks in Iraq during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

Zarqawi's group claimed responsibility for twin suicide bombings that killed five people, including three Americans, inside Baghdad's fortified Green Zone on Thursday.

Those bombings have reinforced UN fears about sending more senior staff to Iraq to help prepare for the elections, a spokesman at UN headquarters in New York said.

The UN pulled all international staff out of Iraq last year after two bomb attacks on UN headquarters in Baghdad, and now keeps no more than 35 staffers in the country.

Interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi threatened on Wednesday to attack Falluja unless its people handed over militants loyal to Zarqawi. City notables who had been in peace talks with the government deny knowledge of the Jordanian's network.

US forces detained chief Falluja negotiator Khaled al-Jumali on Friday, police in the rebel-held town said.

British troops could move nearer Baghdad to cover for US soldiers fighting in Falluja and elsewhere, British media said on Saturday. It would be the first time British troops have operated outside the relatively quiet Basra area in the south.

Up to 650 troops would be involved in the move, which would be meant to last for a few weeks, the BBC said.

A Ministry of Defense spokesman in London said no decision had been made.

Meanwhile, three US soldiers, a marine and a civilian translator were killed and one soldier wounded in two car bombings in Iraq, one to the west and another in the northern city of Mosul, the military said yesterday.

A suicide car bomber blew himself up on Friday afternoon near to an American Humvee that formed part of a patrol near the city of Qaim on Iraq's border with Syria, said marine spokesman Lieutenant Lyle Gilbert.

"There were four dead – one marine, two soldiers and one civilian translator," Gilbert told AFP. He was unable to give the nationality of the translator.

Less than four hours earlier, at about 1:20 pm (1020 GMT), a car bomb exploded on a military convoy travelling through central Mosul, 370 kilometres (230 miles) north of Baghdad, the military said.

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PHOTO: STAR

An army personnel stands guard at the Fakirpool 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 Affairs Lutfuzzaman 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 jail entrance, the pointed out.

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

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 source said seeking anonymity.

"We are also checking whether the abducting accused in the case, 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 details, 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.

2 shot dead

STAFF CORRESPONDENT