

RAMADAN IN: PRICES UP

High prices hit low income bracket

MIZANUR KHAN

The price hike of essentials created panic two weeks to Ramadan that began yesterday causing sufferings to low and middle-income families.

"This happens just two weeks before the fast every year and there is no exception this year as well," said Anita Islam, a homemaker shopping for iftar items at the Karwan Bazar kitchen market.

Prices of items like chhola, dubly and lentils along with both coarse and finer varieties of rice and vegetables also shot up in different kitchen and wholesale markets in the city.

"The spirit of Ramadan is to teach us self-control and understand hunger, but traders are bent on acting to their instincts of greed," an outraged Anita said.

Some traders and common people in different city markets said a section of traders is now busy making windfalls targeting the fast during the holy month.

"They wait for the opportunity to cash in on the holy month of self-restraint," said Akhter Hossain, another shopping for essentials.

Sources said though some essential commodities -- sugar, soybean oil and onion -- widely used during this month in particular, are abundant in the market but their prices have increased abnormally.

Traders and sellers blamed the price increase on a short supply but sources at the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) said there was no dearth of provisions.

Commerce Minister Altaf Hossain Chowdhury acknowledged the hike in the price of rice blaming it on natural calamities. He claimed that three consecutive sunny days would bring the prices back to a normal.

Shoppers at various kitchen markets in the last two days buying vegetables for sehri and iftar found prices unusually high. Aubergine used to prepare beguni, a delicacy for iftar was selling at Tk 70-80 a kilogram while cucumber and carrots rose between Tk 45-50.

"Even a kg of green chilli sells at Tk 120-150. How could the poor survive," said Shamsul Islam, a frustrated consumer at Hatirpool kitchen market.

Karwan Bazar traders said as prices of vegetables shot up because of the huge demand and short supply and price hike this has increased the demand for meat.

Although the authorities fixed the price of meat at Tk 100 a kg of beef and mutton at Tk 140 before Ramadan, consumers allege they are forced to buy meat at higher prices.

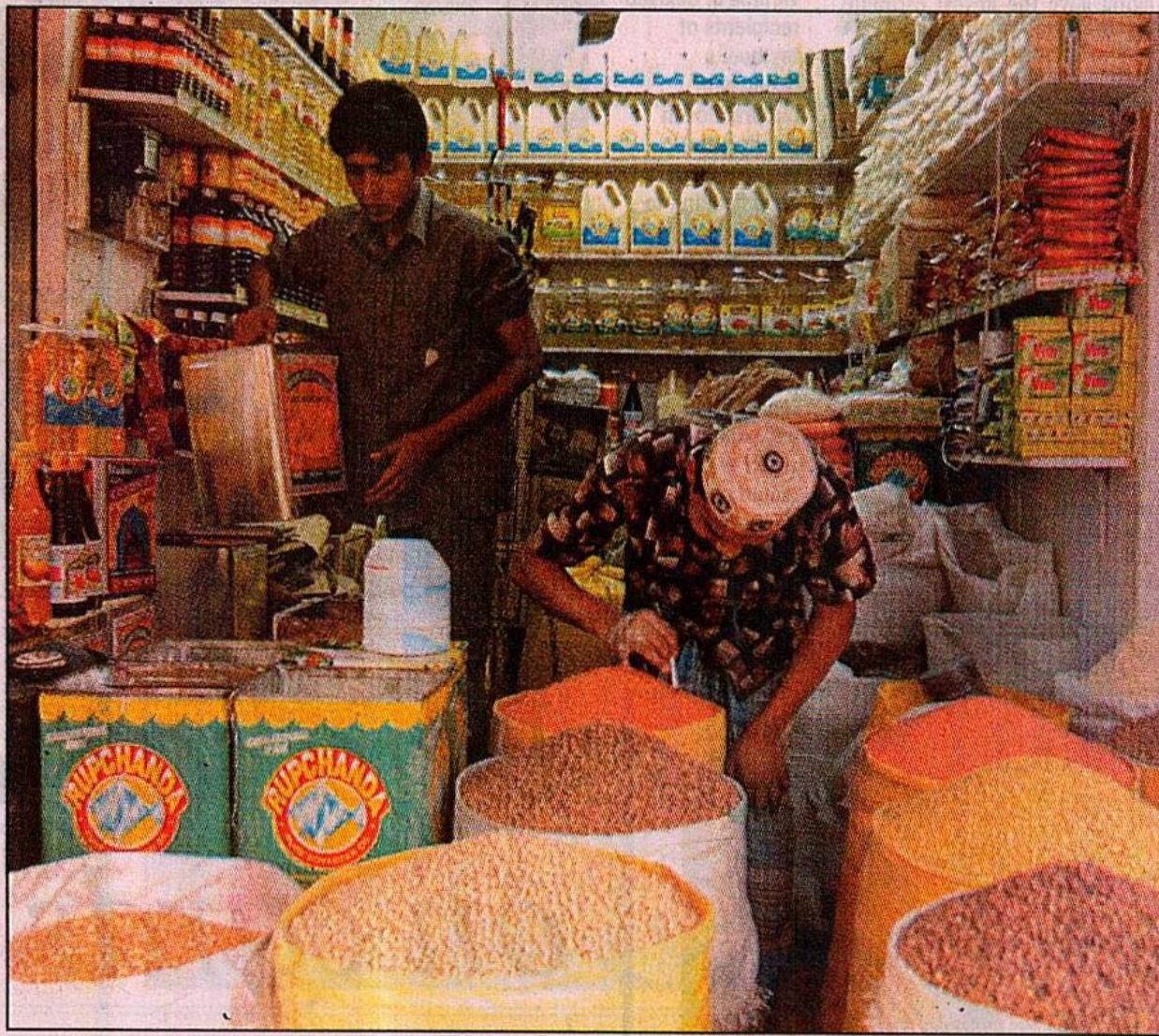
Sellers fear prices will increase further in coming weeks, and expect authority intervention in stabilising prices.

Consumers said importers and wholesalers who manipulate the market with malpractice must be severely punished.

The commerce ministry formed a taskforce ahead of Ramadan including representatives from different ministries to address the price hike, which failed to control the situation.

The government also deployed 28 mobile courts in the city for this month to check market prices. Home ministry officials said the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) and the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) are on special assignments to identify hoarders and control price hike.

According to the Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB), the government failed to bridge the price hike. Kazi Farouq, president of the association, said: "The trend might continue through the month increasing difficulties of consumers."



Essential items for Iftar are in abundance but their prices seem unapproachable to most consumers.



Ah! Rickshaw-free streets

AVIK SANWARAHAMAN

Yesterday's rickshaw strike was a welcome relief to city commuters who hardly saw traffic congestion even during the rush hour between 3 and 4 pm.

Commuters reacted positively to rickshaw-free roads as yesterday's strike showed that rickshaws are one of the main causes of traffic congestion.

"I was confused. The road from Jigatola to Nilkhet was absolutely free. The Jigatola intersection is normally blocked with traffic everyday with rickshaws plying in all directions. The strike has opened our eyes that roads could be free if there were no rickshaws," said Zakir Khan of Jigatola.

"The presence of rickshaws costs time and money. It takes me at least half an hour to reach Moghbazar from Shantinagar and costs Tk. 10 by rickshaw. But today I walked to Moghbazar in 10 minutes. Even buses are able to pick and drop commuters at

proper stops," said Selim Khan, a computer hardware trader.

Some urbanites are of the view that rickshaws make city dwellers lazy and the rickshaw pullers are a waste of labour force.

"We forget we can walk short distances because rickshaws are freely available. We are habituated to sit for hours on rickshaws in a traffic jam," said Shirin Sultana, a boutique owner.

Noise pollution too was at a minimum with the absence of rickshaws.

"We use horns frequently because rickshaws don't maintain order," said a taxicab driver.

"We use rickshaws as we can't afford cars. It is too risky to ply buses, but we still want rickshaw-free streets as it saves us money and time," said Fouzia Ahmed a parent of a student of Wills Little Flower School who use rickshaws to and from school.

"Bus services need to be developed for children and women to substitute rickshaws,"

suggested Shamsun Ara, a schoolteacher who commutes by rickshaw from Moghbazar to Dhanmondi.

"Taxicabs and CNG auto rickshaws should take commuters to whatever their destinations are. Refusal of these drivers is another reason to ride rickshaws," said Munira Jahan.

As slow movers, many commuters recommend that rickshaws are kept for alleys and short distance rides.

"Rickshaw should be off-limits from all main roads," said Rafiqur Rahman of Lalmitia.

Bangladesh Rickshaw and Van Shramik Oikya Porishad (BRVSOP) called rickshaw strike as government announced the eviction of illegal rickshaws on city streets to reduce traffic congestion during Ramadan.

President of BRVSOP Fazlur Rahman said: "The authorities have not been renewing the 79,670 legal licences for the last three years and now they want to evict illegal rickshaws."

The government promised to increase legal licences to 1,50,000 rickshaws from 79,670 according to an agreement between our Parishad and Communication ministry," said Rahman.

"We want separate bylanes for rickshaws and we know that the World Bank has Tk. 1,300 crore to Dhaka City Corporation to construct bylanes and to rehabilitate some rickshaw pullers but we are yet to see any action being taken," he added.

"There are about four lakh rickshaws in the city and eight lakh people eke out a living from this profession while another 40 lakh depend on their income. It will be inhuman to evict rickshaws without rehabilitating the victims," said the president.

According to a DMP (traffic) source, of the 3,002-km road, only 27-km are off-limit to rickshaws. Every year, 23,787 motorised vehicles are added to the already exhausted city.

Mohakhali flyover opens Nov 4 with tremor risk

All STUs yet to be installed to protect earthquake damage

SABRINA KARIM MURSHED

The Mohakhali flyover in the city will be opened to traffic on November 4, four months behind the schedule, although it has yet been made tremor-proof.

Communications Minister Nazmul Huda on Wednesday informed a meeting of the parliamentary standing committee on communications ministry about the government decision to open the city's first flyover on that day.

Construction of the flyover began on December 6, 2001 and it was scheduled to complete by June 2004. The deadline however was extended to September for installing shock transmission units (STUs) to prevent the flyover from damage by earthquake.

As the contractor could not install all the STUs in time, the date was shifted to November. Yet the flyover has 21 STUs installed so far, out of 42. Officials concerned attributed the delay in completing the task to some contractual obligations.

The contractor wanted to install China-made STUs in the flyover but the authorities refused to permit them to use the cheap units, instead suggested installation of US-made STUs, which are of good quality but costlier than the Chinese ones.

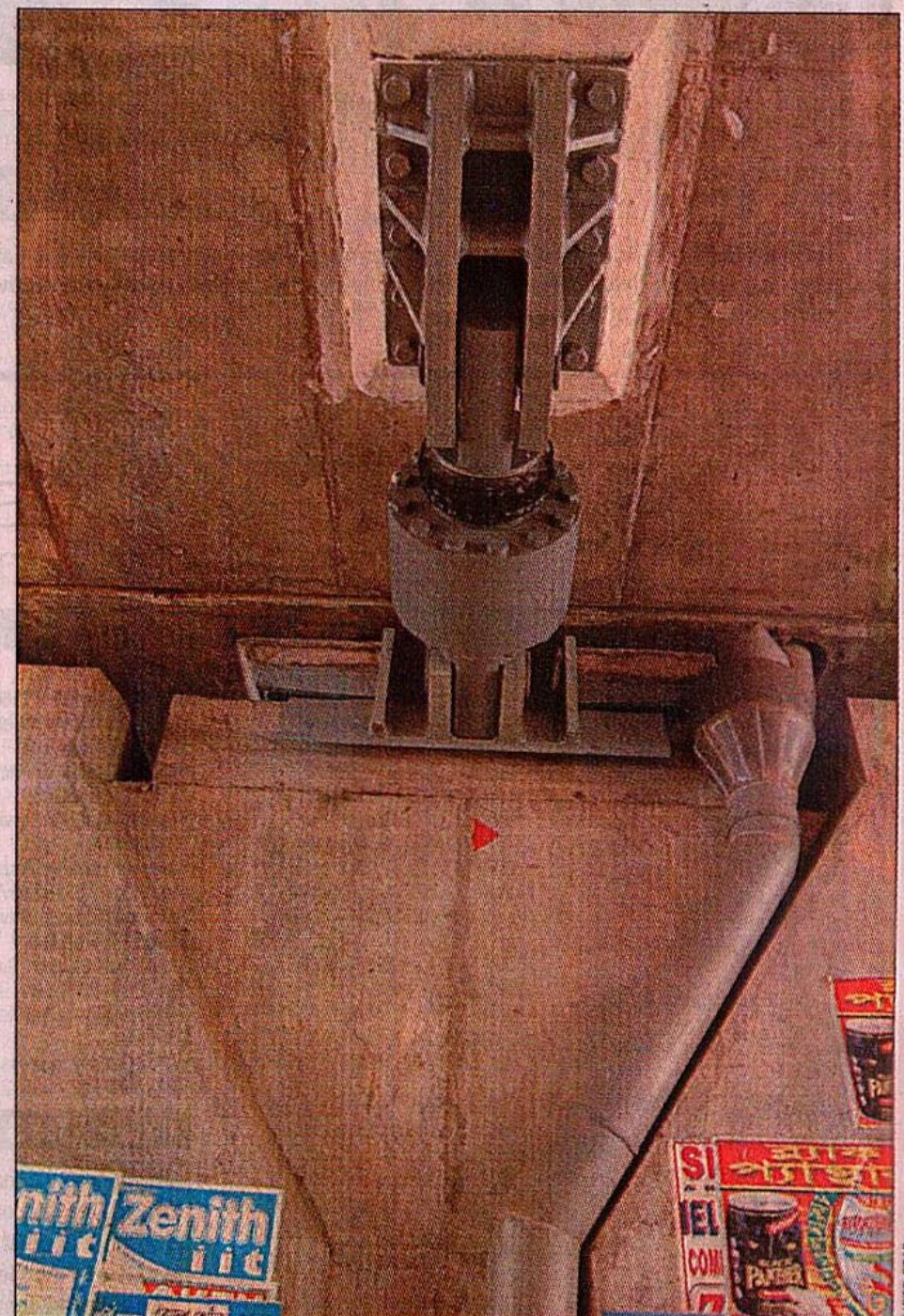
The contractor then brought 21 STUs worth Tk 6.40 crore from the US and installed them. "Now they are dillydallying to bring the rest 21 STUs," said a high official of Dhaka Transport Coordination Board (DTCB).

Asked why the flyover is being opened without all the STUs installed, a high official said the authority is trying to install the rest as soon as possible.

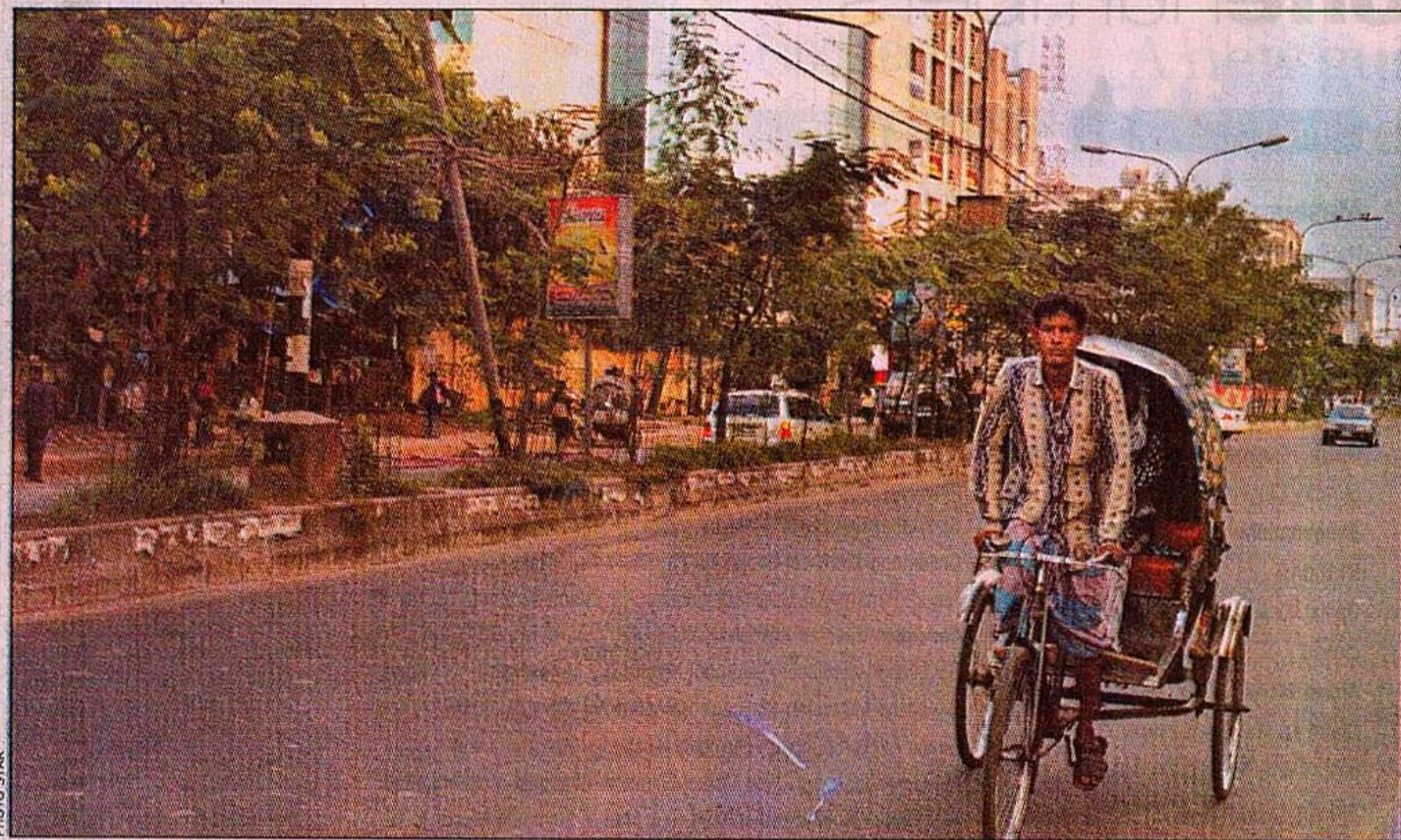
"The flyover is vulnerable whether it is open or not. No matter the flyover is being used or not, it will be damaged if a strong earthquake occurs," he said.

The 1.12 km long and 17.9 meter wide flyover was designed to ease the ever-increasing traffic congestion in city's Mohakhali area. The World Bank-financed flyover is being constructed by First Metallurgical Construction Company of China.

Sources said the authorities had planned to open the flyover on November 7, but prime minister and other ministers' busy schedule on the that day, the National Revolution and Solidarity Day, forced them to fix November 4 for its inauguration.



Twenty one shock transmission units out of 42 were installed at the Mohakhali Flyover, which is scheduled to be opened to traffic on November 4.



Satmasjid road, one of the busiest in the city, was seen almost deserted as Rickshaw Van Owners Association enforced a strike yesterday to protest illegal rickshaw eviction programme by Dhaka City Corporation.