

Homebound passengers' plight at terminals

CITY CORRESPONDENT

The homebound people preparing to leave the city on Eid vacation are suffering a lot in buying tickets of buses, trains and launches as most of the operators have raised the fare despite the government assurance of not increasing it.

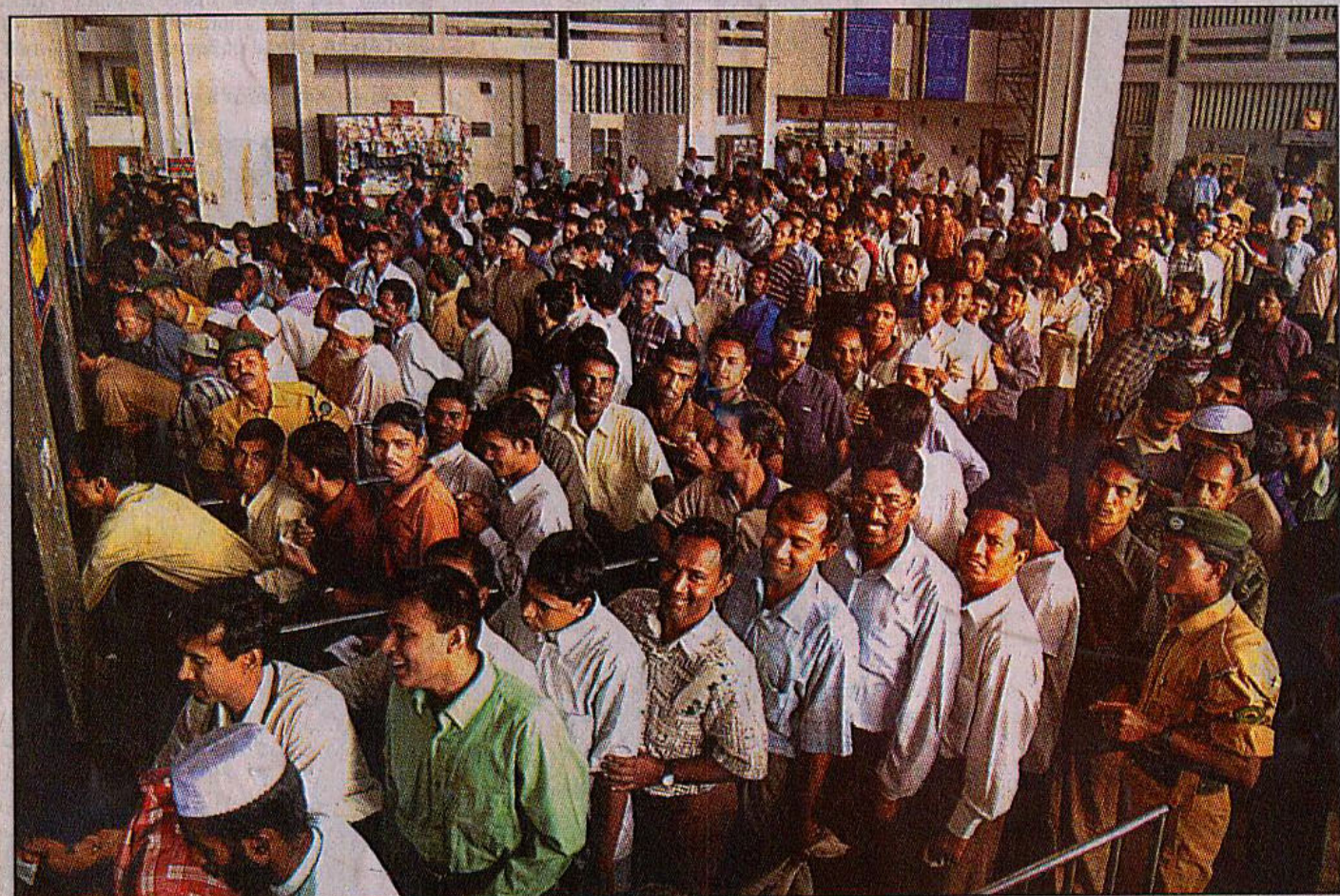
Thousands of people are gathering every day at the launch and bus terminals and Kamalapur Railway Station to buy tickets in advance. Most of them are compelled to buy tickets at exorbitant price while many are returning with empty-handed.

Bangladesh Railway started selling tickets in advance of inter-city trains from November 5 and cancelled weekly off of all trains to cater to the increased need of the passengers but many people complained that they did not get tickets from the counter.

"I am standing in the queue from 8:00 in the morning to buy tickets of Chittagong-bound Subarna Express. Now it is 11:30am and all the tickets have already finished," said Nazrul Islam Chowdhury, a government employee of Mirpur, at Kamalapur station.

He alleged that the scarcity of tickets was artificially created as some people were seen buying tickets by rotation to sell in the black market. "These people are representing the black marketeers, they are not real passengers," said Nazrul.

The communications ministry at a meeting with the leaders of transport sector on October 28 decided not to hike ticket price of buses during Eid. But most passengers said the transport com-



STAR PHOTO

panies have raised fare especially for North Bengal routes.

A syndicate of black marketeers and transport company staff are controlling the sale of bus and train tickets ahead of Eid, they alleged.

Ticket sellers at most of the counters at bus terminals claimed they have sold all the tickets for November 9 to 13. But many passengers alleged some

people have offered them tickets at high price in the name of 'Eid bonus'.

Asked, Communications Minister Nazmul Huda told the Star City that the government has formed a committee with the representatives of all sectors concerned to execute the decision of the ministry and check irregularities in transport sector during Eid.

Hanif Enterprise, a leading transport company, raised fare by Tk 80 to Tk 100 per ticket of different routes. The company started advanced ticket selling on November 4 and closed all the counters by 10:00am the same day saying all the tickets were sold.

"We provide better service. For this, the demand of our tickets is high during Eid," said Minto

from a ticket counter of Hanif Enterprise at College Gate.

"Normally we buy a ticket at Tk 220 for Thakurgaon. Now they are charging Tk 300," said Nusrat Hossain who came to buy tickets at Hanif's counter. "I am ready to pay it but the people at the counter said tickets are not available."

"Tickets are available, but you have to pay Tk 100 to Tk 150 extra for each ticket," said Ismail, a

cigarette vendor near Khaleque Service Station in Kalyanpur.

Shahidul Islam, ticket seller at KB Enterprise counter, said, "We sell tickets at reasonable price because of the increased competition over the years. During Eid we raise the fare a little and it is not much higher than the government fixed rate."

Eagle Paribahan increased ticket price on different Southern routes. On November 4, they started selling tickets of Khulna at Tk 300 against the normal price of Tk 260.

When a Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) team inquired about the ticket price at the company's Kalabagan counter and asked the transport company not to charge high fare, they started selling tickets at normal price.

"We did not increase ticket price except for North Bengal routes. Usually we sell tickets for these routes at below the government rate. On the occasion of Eid we are just charging the official rate," said Kazi Masud Rana of Keya Paribahan.

At Kamalapur station, some porters claimed that they have tickets for any route. Majnu Mia, a porter, charged Tk 120 for a ticket of Agni Beena inter-city train when the Star City Correspondent asked for a ticket. The original price of the ticket is Tk 55.

"We have taken initiative to check sale of tickets in black market. We have alerted our officials and set a temporary GRP camp at the station on the occasion of Eid," said Solaiman Shikder, station manager of Kamalapur Railway Station.

Eid through the eyes of the poor

FAIZUL A TANIM

Festivals like Eid are meant for people who are well off, although money may not be the criterion for happiness but perhaps buys health and good times.

Look at the festival through the eyes of Mohsin, a rickshawpuller. Each year, Eid becomes a burden -- preparation of special food items, buying new clothes, keeping up the pretence of happiness and subduing family discrepancies.

This is Eid after all, a time to be merry. He does not have the means to buy his son a pair of denims and T-shirt or a frock for his daughter -- things they crave for watching the children of their mother's employer trying out their own outfits peering into the mirror. For Mohsin, it is a hand-to-mouth situation.

Most poor people around Dhaka are domestic workers living in slums, autorickshaw and taxicab drivers and rickshawpullers, people of the extremely low-income group.

These people grab any means of employment to sustain themselves -- from breaking stones to managing teashops, barely scraping together an income of Tk 90 to Tk 100 a day. Eighty per cent of the population falls under this category.

A random survey on Eid preparations did not see the one word 'expenses' come up. But an autorickshaw driver said if he got the salary and bonus in time, he might visit his family in his home village.

While most were depressed about not having enough money, a security guard at a bank was hopeful. He wants to follow the cus-

oms, in whatever manner possible: having Shemai and Firni before Eid namaz, a hearty lunch with the family, and going to Shishu Park -- a long-awaited Eid treat. Although he does not have the money yet, he is waiting eagerly for the employer to show some consideration.

Wearing new clothes, Sokhina said: "Red hair-ribbons, eye make-up, red colour lipstick to go along with a frock that abbu bought will be my prized Eid excitement." Meanwhile, her father Rahman regretted that he could not manage because of high costs of living to buy a better dress than the one he had bought from Kawan Bazar market for Tk 240.

Garment worker Shamima will visit her hometown if she receives the extra bonus as promised by her authorities. While many CNG and cab drivers are aiming at higher profits on Eid day, charging their customers more than usual, their dreams of the extras for them may be shattered if they have already received bonuses. The extra income then goes to the employer.

"I will choose to work the morning shift and make as much as possible so that I can take my family to the movies," said Ahmed, a CNG taxi driver.

"My Eid shopping will be limited to Tk 1,000 for my family of five and hopefully I will get the best deal from the Gullistan Hawkers' Market," he added.

Domestic worker Morjina said she might be able to feed her family well on condition she worked hard on Eid day. The work will fetch her some extra money as well.

Safety measures taken for launch passengers

Repairs to many launches made by owners prior to rush of homebound passengers while special security measures have been taken by the authorities

AVIK SANWAR RAHMAN

Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) will deploy special police force to monitor fitness and passenger capacity of the launches to ensure safe journey of the homebound passengers from the city.

"We will deploy special force from the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) at Sadarghat and the river to monitor launches

before Eid," said Syed Monwar Hossain, director port and transportation of BIWTA.

According to BIWTA statistics, everyday some 40,000 people travel by launches through Sadarghat terminal in the capital. The number of passengers increases five times to reach about two lakh during Eid.

There are 624 launch services on 222 internal river routes across the country, which are not

enough to meet the huge demand before the Eid festivals.

Some launch owners have repaired their outdated and faulty vessels to add them to the fleet to provide more services for the Eid commuters.

"Currently 300 launches are in operation from Sadarghat and we have repaired another 100 to meet the increased demand in Eid. But this addition is also inadequate," said Md

Karimullah, chairman of Bangladesh Launch Owners' Association.

As launch accident is a regular feature in every Eid season due to overloading, the BIWTA has decided to ensure proper vigilance and improved management.

There are 827 landing stations across the country but only 304 launch stations have pontoons and jetties. BIWTA has no capacity to monitor all the stations and riverway.

"After discussing with Bangladesh Launch Owners' Association on November 19, the BIWTA took several measures for launch passengers' safety. The Association also agreed to take necessary safety measures before Eid-ul-Fitr.

According to the decision, the launches should not be overloaded and no passenger should travel on the rooftop.

The authorities have asked all launch masters to keep mobile phone during the journey and keep constant contact with BIWTA over phone. BIWTA already distributed mobile phones among the launch owners of inter-regional routes.

"We have already taken measures to renovate Sadarghat and other ferry ghats, pontoons and gangways. Dredging is going on to maintain the depth and width of the channels in major ferry routes," said Monwar Hossain.

The authorities have also taken special measures for

awareness campaign for passengers, launch owners and drivers against overloading and other safety measures for passengers through posters, and advertisements in radio, TV and newspapers.

Hamza, Rustam and other rescue vessels have been kept on alert for salvage operations.

The DMP special force will check the launches if they have adequate safety equipment such as life jackets, buoys and fire-extinguishers, sources said.

"This time we are very cautious about public safety. We don't want to be blamed for a launch capsized for overloading or lack of fitness," said Karimullah. "We have instructed all launch owners to keep adequate safety equipment for passengers."

The launch owners said they need expert drivers to check accidents, as the lack of expert masters is one of the causes of launch accidents. "The government should provide training for launch drivers," said Karimullah.

In the last nine years, more than 100 launches capsized due to overloading, lack of fitness and lack of expert drivers leaving 1,500 passengers dead and 500 missing.

According to a survey by Consumer Association Bangladesh, 512 people died in launch accidents in 2002 and 842 in 2003. On May 23 this year, a collision between MV Lighting Sun and MVDiganta took 81 lives and left many missing.

Shop and get lucky

KAUSAR ISLAM AYON

Gift offers worth at least Tk 3 crore are up for grabs through lucky coupons at shopping malls in the capital ahead of Eid-ul-Fitr.

The idea of introducing lucky coupons began a few years ago at a couple of shopping centres of the city and has gradually become a popular way to attract the customers.

Most of the shopping malls in Dhaka are offering hundreds of different attractive prizes including cars, motor bikes, air tickets, refrigerators, computers, gold items, microwave ovens, colour televisions, washing machines and mobile phone sets.

These gifts are usually kept on display at the entrance of the markets to draw the attention of the customers. The draw for the coupons in most cases will be

held after the Eid.

Bashundhara City, the biggest shopping complex in the country, is offering fully furnished shops, a plot and a car along with others items. Eastern Plaza will give away two cars this year including one luxury Toyota.

Mouchak Market, Rifles Square, Rapa Plaza, Twin Tower Concorde, Karnaphuli Garden city, Meena Bazar, Motilal Plaza, Prince Plaza, Plaza A.R, Metro Shopping Mall, A.R.A Centre have the best gifts on offer said customers.

At these shopping malls customers are getting a lucky coupon for every purchase of over Tk 300 or 500 Taka.

Although the shoppers are happy with this trend, some sellers are not so convinced of its attracting power.

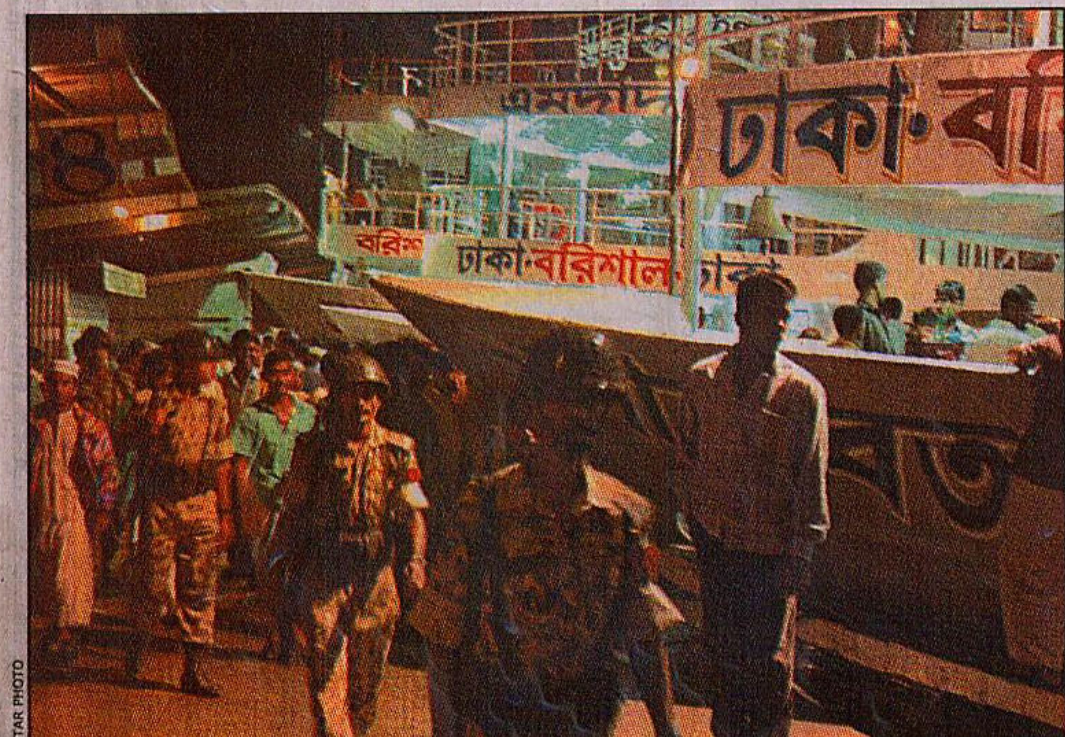
"It cannot enhance the volume

of sales more than all the other shopping malls who are offering almost same prizes," said Saidur Rahaman Pintu of Mouchak Banik Samity.

Many customers are doubtful about the transparency of the draws of these lucky coupons.

"I have doubt whether they really give away the prizes or distribute them among themselves. I do not know anyone who has received gifts like cars from these markets," said Shenzuti Roy at Rifles Square.

"It is true that forty percent of the winners did not come to collect prizes last year but there is no question of transparency. We hold an open draw in the presence of customers. This year we will publish the results in newspapers so that no one can miss out," said Pintu of Mouchak Banik Samity.



Pre-Eid security measures have been taken at launch terminals as well.



Everyone wishes to own a vehicle and shoppers rush to drop in counter-foils for the draw.