



thecitythatwas

Motijheel in downtown was built during the Mughal period. During the time there was a big Mahal for Mirja Mohammad which housed a large pond known as Sukaku Mahal's pond. The area was later named Motijheel. A mazar called Shahjalal's mazar where fairs were organised existed. Motijheel and Dilkusha gardens were in the same place earlier. The road dividing the two places was constructed during the British rule.

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New books scarce and visitors disappointed

SABRINA KARIM MURSHED

Amar Ekushey Book Fair 2005 remained more closed than open because of the hartals since its inauguration on February 1, causing inconvenience and loss to publishers who hired stalls to display their books.

Publishers were anxious about the progress of the fair with more consecutive hartals and other political programmes expected this month.

They said number of visitors was encouraging till last Friday and hoped visitors will continue to pour in. "It is obvious there will be a slump in sales if there are more hartals," said Shankar Das of Samay Prokashoni adding that he found lesser crowds in comparison to previous years. "Our business would certainly be affected if there is no political stability," he said.

However, some publishers and visitors said they did not feel insecure because there was



An empty Amar Ekushey Book Fair 2005 ground on a hartal day.

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adequate security within the fair. "It may dampen the spirit of the fair a bit, but police and other security personnel are at hand to prevent any untold situations," said one stallholder.

"Positive thinkers and ardent readers will visit the fair no matter what barriers are there," said a staff member of a publishing house. "They will not bar themselves from visiting the fair because of hartals or threats by extremists," he said. But, he added, the fair, to some extent is affected by hartals.

Every year publishers bring out new books for exhibition and sale at the Ekushey Book Fair, but this year they have hesitated to go ahead as planned. "We published only five books though we planned more," said Abdul Ali of Muktohara. He said the publishing house would have to incur heavy losses in case of slow sales.

Onno Prokash, another publishing house also brought out only 17 of the 60 books they targeted for publishing in this

year's book fair. "It is not that we would not publish them, but we are hesitant at this moment," said Sanaul Kabir Chowdhury.

However, most stallholders said bigger publishing houses like Muktohara may survive as their business runs throughout the country. "But to smaller publishing houses that bring out books targeting sales only at the fair, the drop in visitors would have an adverse effect on their business," commented the owner of a small publishing house.

Stallholders also described other inconveniences they face including transportation of books during hartal hours. They said they could not carry books to the fair during the day, as motorised vehicles do not ply the streets. "In addition, we were not permitted to bring in books to the fair after six in the evening," said Sanaul Kabir Chowdhury. "That is why I could not supply books to meet my customers' demands and many of them went home disappointed," he said.

city express

The latest crop of quotes from the city's press -- words worth repeating, we feel, for their humour, insight or sheer outrageousness. Star City does not necessarily support the opinions expressed in this column.

"The spontaneous participation of all of you has given the confidence that we are not alone and we will be able to do something"



-- Asma Kibria

Wife of former finance minister Shah AMS Kibria killed in grenade attack.

Said at the end of the protest programme on February 4.

Source: The Daily Star

"It's not possible to reduce the interest rates by enforcing hartal"

-- Saifur Rahman
Finance and Planning Minister

Told reporters at his secretariat after a meeting with central bank and nationalised commercial banks on strengthening monitoring system to stop volatility in call money and foreign exchange on February 3.

Source: The Daily Star

"India does not act on the desires of the Awami League"

-- Abdul Jalil
General Secretary, Awami League

Told a press conference at the Dhanmondi party office in reply to the accusations of the ruling party on the postponement of the Saarc summit, on February 4.

Source: Bhorer Kagoj



"The killing of Kibria is an isolated incident and such an incident does not prove that the government is unable to ensure security for a few guests"

-- Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan

LGRD Minister and BNP Secretary General
Said at a press conference accusing Awami League of "hatching conspiracy" for postponement of the Saarc summit, on February 3.

Source: The Daily Star

"We will not become a Haji Selim or Haji Makbul on streets but we will prevent all negative programmes by the opposition"

-- Mirza Abbas
Public Works Minister

Said at the meeting of the BNP city committee on February 5.

Source: Prothom Alo

RICE & FLOUR PRICES AT PAR

Poor left with no alternative

KAUSAR ISLAM AYON

With prices of rice and wheat flour (ata) reaching the same level, the poor are yet to find an alternative for these two staple foods. The retail price of flour is Tk. 18-19 a kilogram (kg) while a kg of rice is between Tk. 17.50 to Tk. 22.

Traders increased the price of rice blaming poor harvest of Aman citing the highest-ever rainfall and floods as reasons. But there was no valid reason for the hike in flour prices.

"At one stage ata was an alternative for rice and when we could not afford to consume rice ate roti (bread). With the increase in ata prices we have lost that option," said Abdul Kashed, a day labour.

"Rice is beyond our means and the price of ata has risen too. My family and I have nothing to turn to now," said Kader, a rickshawpuller.

Ata in its loose form has almost disappeared from city markets and shops and has been replaced by packed flour marketed by different companies.

The price of packed ata, three months ago was Tk. 15 a kg while loose ata was sold at Tk. 12-14 a kg.

The wheat flour companies increased the price gradually leaving no room for the middle class to feel the hike but it struck



the poor very hard," said Kashem Molla a trader from the Hatirpool kitchen market.

Owners of bakeries, restaurants and various caterers are contemplating on increasing the prices of wheat flour related products like breads, biscuits, porota and rotis.

"The price hike of flour would compel us to increase prices of

our products. But I will wait patiently a while longer to see if there would be a further increase in price and then think of re-pricing my products," said Kashemullah Khan of Khan Hotel (a restaurant).

The current price of a kg of rice in the different kitchen markets in the city are as follows: minicake Tk 21-23, paimaj Tk 18-20, lata Tk 21-23, paimaj Tk 18-20, lata Tk

18-19, majrisal Tk 21-22, IRRI Tk 17-18, jamir Tk 17-18.50, aman Tk 18-19.50, and sarna at Tk 17-18.

Although the price of soybean oil, another essential item, decreased by Tk. 2 a kg, prices of various varieties of oil still remain out of the reach of poor.

Prices of other essentials, especially vegetables and fish,

have also shot up in last few days because of various reasons said traders.

"Whatever the reasons are we suffer most," said Lutfar, a labour of the Karwan Bazar kitchen market. "The government should bring down the price of essential items, so that we can survive," he said.

Source: Bhorer Kagoj



A store in Karwan Bazar holding stocks of bags of rice and flour (left) while a cart carries piles of bags of flour to retail outlets (right).

Indian visa seekers in the grip of middlemen

FAIZUL KHAN TANIM

As a huge number of people crowd the Indian High Commission in Dhaka six days a week seeking visa, a section of middlemen are making a quick buck exploiting the need of the visa seekers.

About 2,000 to 2,500 visa seekers come to the high commission at Gulshan but on average 1,600 visas are issued a day. The applicants have to wait for hours in long queues to reach the counters.

At least three groups of middlemen are active in the high commission area. One group sells visa application forms, another 'assists' people in filling in the forms and the last one sells 'serial' for them.

The middlemen approach the

people to collect visa forms from them and then ask if they need help in filling in the forms. They easily convince the illiterate and half-educated visa seekers charging Tk 10 for filling in each form.

The high commission does not charge any fee for visa forms but the middlemen are selling each form at Tk 30 to Tk 50. To avoid long queues, most of the visa seekers buy forms from these groups.

People who need emergency visa can avoid wastage of time by giving these middlemen money to 'buy' a serial number, which will be called by the high commission staff earlier than the others.

Some of these middlemen go to the high commission in the early hours and stand at the forefront of the queues. Then they let the emergency visa seekers stand in their places in exchange for money

ranging from Tk 500 to Tk 800.

The visa seekers allege that the policemen patrolling around the high commission are also involved in exploiting the urgency of the visa seekers. They take bribe to let someone stand at the front of the queue.

Assistant Commissioner, Chancery, Iqbal Hossain, who is in-charge of the security of the embassies in Dhaka, however, said, "We still did not receive any complaints about police taking bribe."

"If any visa seeker faces any problem, he can report to Gulshan Police Station or the Police Headquarters. In case of bribery, one must give evidence and names of the policemen. We will take immediate action."

The areas around the high commission on road no 142 in Gulshan remains always crowded with two long queues, one for

male and another for female, stretching up to the Gulshan Shooting Club.

"I am a patient with kidney problems. I need a visa, but we have to stand here from 4:00 or 5:00am. There is no toilet around this place. I can die or get severely sick anytime," said Fahmidah Alam, a visa seeker.

"We used to go to travel agents who managed our visa taking Tk 200 to Tk 300 for each. But now they charge even Tk 1,500 and it is quite impossible for the middle class people to afford," said another applicant.

The visa seekers say the high commission should open a second office or visa section to tackle the huge number of applicants.

Locals are also annoyed to see the crowd every day in the area.

"We cannot use the road (no 142) till at least 12 noon. No cars can pass due to the huge line and



Indian visa seekers line up from early in the day to get a chance of submitting their applications.

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