

Smoking discouraged, not tobacco cultivation

Farmers in nine districts now prefer tobacco to other crops

STAR NATIONAL DESK

The law prohibiting smoking in public places took effect yesterday, but the scene is otherwise in tobacco fields.

Despite the anti-smoking campaign by the government, NGOs and civil society bodies, tobacco cultivation increased substantially in seven southwestern districts, Rangpur and Nilphamari in last two years at the cost of other crops like wheat, mustard seeds and vegetables, mainly due to assistance to farmers by cigarette and Bidi companies.

They provided interest-free loans, seed, fertiliser, technical support and buy back facilities to farmers, according to our correspondents in the region.

Cultivation of the harmful crop increased at a time when the Agriculture Extension Department (AED) is implementing its North West Crop Diversification Project (NCDP) with the help of two NGOs -- Brac and Prosika -- to keep farmers away from it.

Amanur Aman reports from Kushtia:

Tobacco cultivation increased to 22,435 hectares of land in the seven southwestern districts of Kushtia, Jhenidah, Meherpur, Chuadanga, Jessore, Magura and Rajbari this year from 20, 222 hectares last year. In 2003, the crop was cultivated on 17,000 hectares in the region.

Cigarette and Bidi companies including a big multinational one fixed tobacco production target at 40,000 tonnes this year in the seven districts against 32,000 tonnes last year, according to sources in the companies.

This year, the multinational company gave loans and other assistance to farmers to cultivate tobacco on 9,547 hectares, up from last year's 7,000 hectares, sources in the company told this correspondent.

The rest 12,888 hectares are under farmers assisted by other companies.

The companies gave loans up to Tk 5000 against one bigha (30 decimal) of land, with buy-back assurances.

The companies have a large number of field workers to do the job, sources said.

This correspondent talked to several farmers in Meherpur, Chuadanga and Rajbari during visits on Wednesday and Thursday. The farmers admitted getting loans and other facilities from cigarette

companies but declined to be named.

A farmer in Gobindagunia in Meherpur said his name will be dropped from the list (of a company) if his name is published in a news-paper.

Some officials of the multinational company, when contacted, however said they are giving priority to export of cigarette than marketing those at home.

They said Bangladeshi cigarettes are being exported to some European countries, Thailand and Myanmar. The company earned 43 lakh Dollars in 2002, 72 lakh in 2003

and 75 lakh in 2004 by exporting cigarette produced from tobacco grown in the country.

Some other companies together earned 7 lakh dollars in 2002, 12 lakh in 2003 and 11 lakh in 2004, it was gathered.

Rafique Sarker reports from Rangpur:

The area under tobacco cultivation has almost doubled in the district in the last several years. About 12000 hectares of land were brought under its cultivation this year, according to sources in the AED.

High prices of tobacco last year

inspired farmers in the district to cultivate it in large scale in the current season, farmers said.

The price was Tk 18000 to 2500 per maund last year, which varied from Tk 550 to 800 two-three years back, traders said.

Tobacco is cultivated in eight upzilas in the district-- Gangachara, Taraganj and Rangpur Sadar upzilas being the main producers.

Some 30 cigarette companies are purchasing tobacco in Rangpur. Most the purchasers have set up depots on either side of Rangpu-Dinajpur highway. A multinational company has also set up a big

Wheat cultivation declined from 14,800 hectares to 9,950 hectares, mastered seed from 850 hectares to 725 hectares, jute from 12,500 hectares to 10,620 hectares. Production of other crops including vegetables ahas also declined.

Visiting different village including Itakhola, Tupanani in Nilphamari Sadar, Deshibai and Tengenmari in Jaldhaka upazila and Putimari in Kishoregang upazila, this correspondent found that some Bangladeshi companies had given farmers interest free loans up to Tk 5000 each, fertiliser, seeds and even technical support.

Interestingly, tobacco farmers, unlike IRRi-Boro cultivators, did not face any problem due to high price of fertiliser this year. Tobacco plants are disease resistant, needs little irrigation and farmers can easily produce and preserve seeds.

The price is Tk 800 to 1200 this year depending on varieties against last year's Tk 1200 to 2000 a maund.

Three varieties of tobacco are produced in the district. These are Virginia (for cigarette), Motihar for bidi and Jai variety for producing chewing tobacco.

Tobacco cultivation on one bigha of land costs up to Tk 1500 but the product can be sold at Tk 6000 to Tk 10,000, some farmers said.

There is no marketing problem as there are at least 20 big tobacco companies ready to purchase tobacco from different markets in the district.

When contacted DAE Deputy Director Shakhawat Hossen said they do not provide any support for tobacco cultivation.

They have launched the North West Crops Diversification Project (NCDP) with the help of two NGOs --Brac and Prosika -- to keep farmers away from tobacco cultivation.

But the DD admitted that under the prevailing situation, farmers will not give up tobacco cultivation as it is easier and more profitable.

He (DD) suggested that the government should think about ways to discourage tobacco cultivation. One option may be to limit its cultivation through registration of farmers, he said.



PHOTO: STAR

Farmers harvesting tobacco in a village in Rangpur Sadar Upazila

purchasing centre in Rangpur.

This correspondent talked to a number of tobacco dealers and farmers at Hazihiat and Uttom markets. They agreed that the tendency among farmers for tobacco production in Rangpur is increasing once again after a lull a decade back.

DAE initiatives to discourage tobacco cultivation and encourage other winter crops like wheat and vegetables have totally stopped in the district, it is alleged.

EAM Asaduzzaman reports from Nilphamari:

Production of tobacco is increasing in the district.

Incentives by tobacco traders and cigarette and Bidi companies, lack of effective anti-tobacco motivation and favourable weather are responsible for this, it was gathered.

Tobacco cultivation had declined in the district about a decade back and farmers got inclined to IRRi-Boro paddy, wheat and other winter crops like mustard seeds and vegetables following crops diversification programme by the government

and some NGO.

As tobacco production fell, cigarette and Bidi companies and some big tobacco traders provided interest free loan, fertiliser, seed and advice to farmers. This worked very well and the cultivation and production rose again at the cost of other crops.

Statistics collected from DAE (Department of Agriculture Extension) shows that last year tobacco was cultivated on 10, 800 hectares of land in the district, which has jumped to 13,500 hectares this year.

Local leaders reject new B'baria JP body

OUR CORRESPONDENT, B'baria

Fifty local leaders and workers of Jatiya Party (JP) have rejected its newly-formed district committee.

The rejection came from a press conference at Brahmanbaria Press Club.

District unit secretary of the party Abdul Wahid Khan read out a written statement in the conference.

Party central committee formed the new committee consisting of 108 members on March 21. Jahangir Muhammad Adel and Abdul Awal were made president and secretary of new the committee.

Addressing the press conference they said they will resign *en masse* if the committee is not dissolved and a new one not formed in consultation with local leaders.

A SAD TORNADO TALE

Zahir can't tell 8-yr-old kid his mother, sister are no more

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Rangpur

Eight-year-old Zahedul looked for his mother as he regained sense after four days, not knowing she was no more.

Fighting for life at Rangpur Medical College Hospital (RMCH), the boy with severe head injury is one of the victims of last Sunday's tornado in Gaibandha and Rangpur.

Zahedul's mother and two other members of the family from Kutthipara in Sadullahpur upazila were killed in the tornado that lashed four upazilas of the two districts.

His father Zahir did not let his

only surviving son know that his mother had left them for good.

"I rushed to the hospital taking Zahedul, leaving behind the dead bodies of my wife, another son Zoynal and my brother Alamgir. I still do not know anything about their burial," Zahir said as tears rolled down his cheeks.

"I know they are already dead. So, I am trying to save Zahedul. But I am now losing hope as doctors seldom come to see my son."

RMCH doctors prescribed medicines and asked him to buy those from outside.

"I am too poor to buy medicine," he lamented while talking to this correspondent yesterday.

Doctors said the boy needs surgery but RMCH lacks equipment and facilities for this.

One doctor seeking anonymity said Minister for Food and Disaster Management Chowdhury Kamal Ibne Yusuf and State Minister for Housing and Public Works Alamgir Kabir visited Zahedul and other tornado victims at the hospital on Thursday and asked the hospital authorities to ensure proper treatment of the child.

While visiting the hospital on Tuesday, the deputy minister for food and disaster management also gave similar instructions but to no effect.

Magura AL council now on April 4

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Magura

The triennial council of Magura district Awami League (AL) will now be held on April 4 instead of March 31.

The date has been shifted following a directive from the party high command due to the countrywide hartal called by the party on March 31, party sources said.

The March 31 date was announced on March 12 by the district AL convener Altaf Hossain.

The last council was held in 1992. The council was scheduled thrice in the last 14 months but could not be held due to internal feud.

The two rival factions led by district convener Md. Altaf Hossain and Joint Convener MS Akbar MP clashed at least on 14 occasions in last one year, party sources said.

The rift in the party surfaced in January last year when the two factions held separate party programmes.

Schoolboy Rajab murder: 5 arrested in Satkhira

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Satkhira

Five persons including a housewife were arrested in connection with the gruesome murder of a schoolboy at village Bishnupur in Kaliganj upazila on Monday.

The arrested persons are Rajab Ali, his wife Jahanara Begum, his father Korban Ali, besides Nirmal Mondal and Dewan Ali of the same village.

Ayub Ali, 14 son of Noor Ali Gazi was abducted and killed following a land dispute between victim's father and Rajab Ali, his family claimed.

The body in three pieces was recovered by police on Wednesday from a bush near their house.

A case was filed with Kaliganj Police Station (PS).



PHOTO: STAR

Work on construction of Patuakhali central bus terminal is stopped since 2003 as extortionists demanded Tk. 25 lakh toll from the constructions firm.

How does the upazila run?

OUR CORRESPONDENT, B'baria

Seven administrative posts of Nabinagar Upazila in the district are vacant for long.

According to office sources, the vacant posts are of Assistant Commissioner (land), Upazila Food Officer, Upazila Education Officer, Upazila Cooperative Officer, Upazila Livestock Officer, and Upazila Additional Agriculture Office.

The Upazila Nirbahi Officer is doing the work of Assistant Commissioner (Land) and Upazila Election Officer.

Work is being greatly hampered due to lack of these officials, the UNO told this correspondent.

Wife threatened for suing husband's killers

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Kushtia

A widow is being threatened by alleged killers of her husband to withdraw case against them or 'face the dire consequence.'

Firoja Khatun, widow of slain trader Sekander Ali of village Harabhanga in Gangni, Meherpur appealed to the law enforcement authorities to ensure safety and security to herself and three teenage children. She appealed this while addressing a press conference at Gangni Press Club recently.

While narrating the story, she said rivals jointly led by their neighbours Amirul and Zabbar killed her husband due to a long-standing land dispute on July 6 in 2003.

The killers allegedly belong to ruling party and have links with an outlawed party, she disclosed.

The next day of the murder, Firoja filed a case accusing 18 people including Amirul and Zabbar. Police arrested four of the accused persons who got bail last month.

When contacted with Gangni Police Station duty officer, he told this correspondent they arrested a few of the culprits but they were freed on bail while the remaining others have absconded.

Extortionists stop bus terminal work in Patuakhali

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Patuakhali

Extortionists stopped construction of the World Bank (WB) assisted Patuakhali central bus terminal as the construction firm did not pay them Tk 25 lakh toll.

M/s Khan & Sons (Bangladesh Ltd) was building the Tk 1.6 crore terminal on a contract from the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) under its Municipal Services Project (MSP).

The work began in March 2003 and about 40 percent work was completed till January last year.

The firm was given Tk 60.74 lakh as running bill on February 15 last year, LGED officials said.

On February 20 last year, a gang lead by a powerful public representative went to the site and demanded Tk 25 lakh from the owner of the firm. As he refused, they looted and plundered equipment and materials and stopped the work, an official of the firm said.

The contractor left the site with his men on the day and is yet to return.

LGED sent four letters to the firm but it is yet to resume work, but to no response, LGED sources said.

LGED cancelled the contract with the firm and forfeited its security money.

Meanwhile, LGED has prepared a new estimate of Tk 1.31 crore for completing the unfinished work and sent it to higher authorities for approval. But the new proposal is yet to be approved, they said.

On the other hand, the period of the MSP under which the bus terminal was being built has expired, making the construction work uncertain, the sources said.

LGED Executive Engineer Khalilur Rahman, when contacted said, "We are trying our best to complete the work". He however denied that toll was demanded.



Unocal Bangladesh president Andrew L. Fawthrop (R) after inaugurating Dighalbak Soloman Sharkar Government Primary School at Dighalbak near Unocal's Bibiyana field recently.



PHOTO: STAR

Construction of Taltoli Bridge on Kirtonkhola river near Barisal city is suspended for five years after spending 1.5 cr taka.

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