Star city

DHAKA MONDAY APRIL 9, 2007

thecitythatwas

In old days, the present Shahidullah Hall area of Dhaka University was known as "Baag-e-Musa Kha". According to Hakim Habibur Rahman, the area was a garden and was famous as garden of Muslims. It was named after Musa Kha, who was the son of Isa Kha, one of the famous Baro Bhuiyan. Musa Kha was captived when he lost a war with Subader Islam Kha. However, Subade Islam Kha was very kind to him.

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Tailback grows longer at city CNG stations

RAIHAN SABUKTAGIN

CNG filling stations in Dhaka are experiencing long tailbacks of vehicles due to closure of about 30 percent CNG filling stations and rapid increase of CNG-run vehicles triggered by recent petroleum price hike.

Rupantarita Prakritik Gas Company Limited (RPGCL) during drives in the last couple of weeks had shut down 18 out of 63 CNG (compressed natural gas) filling stations in and around the capital as some of these stations had unpaid gas bills while others had illegal gas connections, an RPGCL source told Star City.

RPGCL, a Petrobangla company, was established in 1987 to implement CNG-based transportation infrastructure in Bangladesh. It is also the regulatory body to popularise and monitor CNG operations in the country.

The recent government decision to hike petroleum prices came at a time when CNG filling stations were already crammed with vehicles since fewer operational filling stations had been open to public after the RPGCL crackdown on unscrupulous station owners.

Aside from that, after the fuel price hike, many CNG-run vehicle owners who used to run their vehicles only on gasoline, are rushing to filling stations to fill up their vehicle cylinders with CNG, said a number of filling station operators.

Shahadat Hossain, an automobile engineer working at Moni CNG Refuelling Limited at Shewrapara, told Star City that after the price hike of petroleum last week, most vehicle owners who previously used both gas and petroleum in their vehicles, started to use only CNG.

Making several trips to Rokeya Sarani on Thursday and Friday, this correspondent found two CNG filling stations closed out of a total of nine on the road. Long queues of vehicles were seen near all the stations that were open.

Ashraf Ali, a cab driver waiting in line at a filling station told Star City that he had been waiting there for three hours. "I have to earn enough to pay the daily deposit of the vehicle as well as to support myself and my family after a few hours left of my work hours. I don't know how would be able to do that since I have been losing my valuable work hours here at the station. I have no other way but to collect more than the authorised fare from passengers. And that is a very difficult task," said a frustrated Ashraf.

CNG conversion workshops in the city are also experiencing an increased demand and long queues of vehicles since the fuel price hike.

Over 80 CNG conversion shops in the city have been working double shifts lately to keep up with the increased demand for CNG conversion of vehicles.

Sumit Kumar Saha, assistant general manager of Navana CNG Limited, told Star City that even though their conversion capacity remains the same, they are experiencing an increased demand for CNG conversion of vehicles after the gasoline price hike by the government on April 2.

Nazmul Haque, president of Petroleum Dealers, Distributors, Agents and Pump owners Association, said gross irregularities were encouraged in the CNG sector during the previous four-party alliance government and that led to closures of many CNG filling stations.

He said although the World Bank had previously proposed twice to the Bangladesh government to provide loan facilities to existing petroleum pump owners for setting up CNG filling facilities at their stations, the government refused their proposal. "Now the government has decided to make CNG filling facilities mandatory for every petrol pump. But I can assure you that without financial assistance from the government, it will take a long time to implement this decision."

Even if all pump owners in the city start setting up CNG filling facilities at this very moment with the government assistance, the crisis created by the onrush for CNG would continue for at least another year and a half, a number of petroleum traders speculated.

STAR PHOTO

A long tailback at a Mahakhali filling station where CNG drivers have to wait for hours for a refill.

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.

"People of Bangladesh will decide that"

-- Lieutenant General Moeen U Ahmed
Army chief
Told reporters when asked whether he would lead the country considering the failure of political leaders, on Monday.
Source: Prothom Alo

"The upcoming election will not be so ordinary like the previous ones"

-- Mainul Hosein
Law Adviser
Said at the concluding ceremony of a training programme for reporters organised by Bangladesh Economic Association, on Saturday.
Source: The Daily Star

"Previously indigenous people did not become happy at the victory of Bangladesh Cricket Team but now they do"

Raja Debashish Roy
Chief, Chakma Circle
Said at the opening ceremony of first indigenous theatre festival, on Monday. Source: Prothom Alo

"Our performance shows what kind of hard work he [Dav Whatmore] has put in"

--Habibul Bashar
Captain, Bangladesh Cricket Team
Told a reporter, on Saturday. Source: The Daily Star

"It is not my duty to guard the vegetable patches"

--Md Jaber Ali
Security officer
Told a reporter after pumpkins were stolen from the vegetables patches on which postgraduate students of Sher-e-Bangla Agriculture University were doing research, on Friday. Source: Prothom Alo

"It is not right to ask me questions related to politics right now"

-- Mosharaf Hossain Shahjahan
Former state minister for religion
Said at BBC Shanlgap at Barisal when asked about the dominance of family dynasty in BNP, on Saturday. Source: Prothom Alo

"For the first time the media appreciated our bravery and pointed out our technical shortcomings"

-- An official of fire service
Told a reporter, on Tuesday. Source: The Daily Star

"It is unbelievable what I have read in the newspaper about the corruption of the vice chancellors. I do not want to believe it"

-- Ayub Quadri
Education Adviser
Said at a meeting with reporters, on Tuesday. Source: Prothom Alo

Compiled by: Durdana Ghias

MORSHED ALI KHAN

As soon as the match between South Africa and Bangladesh was over just after 3 AM yesterday, triumphant city dwellers took to the streets in their thousands. Men, women and children of all ages took to the deserted streets of the city. Vehicles blaring horns, youths beating drums and chanting 'Bangladesh, Bangladesh walked towards the Dhaka University campus. The TSC roundabout became a veritable dancing floor with youths waving national

FOLLOW-UP

DHANMONDI EIDGAH

Plan for public park shelved

WAHIDA MITU

The government has shelved plans to convert the open space on the western part of Dhanmondi Eidgah on Sat Masjid Road into a public park until funds are available.

The Public Works Department's (PWD) had planned to convert the piece of land into a park hoping that the funds would be allocated from the government's 'block allocation'. Since all block allocation is suspended, the project will not see the light of day until the next budget, said one of the high officials concerned.

The PWD's civil engineering and arboriculture wings are responsible to recover and convert the area into a park. Finding the public land unattended for years, the Eidgah mosque committee tried to grab the land and build a madrasa on it.

The PWD took the initiative recently for turning the place into a public park in front of the historic Eidgah, a demarcated area for Eid congregation built during the Mughal period in 1640.

According to sources, PWD had submitted the plan along with a design for a Tk 13 lakh proposed public park project to the chief engineer's office on February 14. The department of arboriculture, which would do the landscaping of the park, had also sent their plan and design of the project estimating Tk 5 lakh.

On June 11 last year, the Ministry of Housing and Public Works approved the plan to convert the PWD-owned vacant land next to the historical Eidgah into a park.

According to the design of the park, there will be a grill-fenced boundary and the arboriculture wing of the PWD would plant trees in the park along the Sat Masjid Road.

The local ward commissioner and the Eidgah mosque committee have attempted to grab approximately one bigha of the land situated between Sat Masjid Road and the Eidgah. On January 23, the committee with the help of the ward commissioner chopped down several trees on the site.

The mosque committee claimed that the whole area inside the boundary of the Eidgah Maidan including the piece of vacant land situated between Sat Masjid Road and the western boundary of the Eidgah is a Waqf estate.

PWD officials admitted that they were aware of the tree felling and claimed that the Eidgah belongs to the Department of Archaeology while the mosque is a Waqf estate. But the remainder of the land, an area of 2.5 acres, definitely belongs to PWD. The mosque authorities have only been using parts of their land upon receiving permission from PWD.

The residents of the area welcomed the PWD decision to convert the place into a park but feared that if the process is delayed, the powerful mosque committee backed by the local ward commissioner Abul Khaer Bablu will encroach on the land.

STRANDED REFUGEES

Looking for a nationality for 36 years

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

"I realised my status in this country for the first time when I was appearing in SSC exam. I had to mention my nationality in the registration paper. It was confusing for me because I did not know which country I belong to," said Mohammad Hasan.

"My father always told me that we would go back to Pakistan, though I was born here, I grew up here," he added.

"This situation brought new perspectives in to my life. I realised that I am a person without citizenship, a person without recognition from any country in the world", said Hasan.

Hasan belongs to the Urdu-speaking Bihari community of Bangladesh commonly known as the stranded Pakistanis.

These Urdu-speaking youths, growing up in Geneva Camp, Mohammadpur and other parts in the country, are desperate to find their identity, with the aspiration to obtain recognition as citizens of Bangladesh.

Many of them consider themselves as Bangladeshis. But the older generation's hopes to return to a land that didn't want them are slowly fading away.

According to a survey conducted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are around 250,000 to 300,000 Biharis in Bangladesh. Around 160,000 are languishing in as many as 116 camps across the country.

However, there is a confusion about the total number of Biharis living in Bangladesh. Different organisations have different figures.

The survey reveals that some 50,000 to 52,000 of Biharis are living in Dhaka in around 30 camps. The largest is the Geneva Camp situated in Mohammadpur. Around 20,000 Biharis are now living there in 2,500 shanties.

A large number of the residents of today's Geneva Camp or camps outside Dhaka migrated to Bangladesh from Bihar, India during the decades following the partition in 1947. Many migrated fearing persecution during communal riots that occurred right before and after the partition. Most of these people settled in areas like Mirpur and Mohammadpur in Dhaka and all around Bangladesh.

Without citizenship the Biharis lack proper schooling, health care facilities or rights to ownership of any property. They have very little access to resources that could help them lead better life. They cannot vote and cannot travel outside the country because they are not eligible for a passport.

The young Bihari generation desperately tries to shake off their identity as 'stranded Pakistanis' in an effort to avoid the stigma associated with the term.

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CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

- During the Liberation War, majority of the Biharis rallied behind the Pakistani junta. They openly opposed the creation of Bangladesh.
- After the end of the war they were confined to various camps throughout Bangladesh along with the prisoners of war.
- The government of Bangladesh in 1972 offered the community the choice of repatriation to Pakistan. In December 1973 the International Committee of Red Cross completed registration of 539, 669 persons who wished to return to Pakistan.
- In August 1973, a tripartite agreement was signed between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh regarding their repatriation. Pakistan laid down three-point criterion to determine who is eligible for repatriation.
- During 1973-74, around 120,000 were repatriated.
- Repatriation were stalled several times. Despite the three conditions in the agreement, Pakistan allowed Biharis to be repatriated only on humanitarian grounds.
- Nearly 9,900 Biharis repatriated to Pakistan between 1977 and 1979 and 4,800 more of them in 1982.
- The last batch of Biharis was repatriated in 1993, leaving around 238,000 behind. Since then only talks took place in the diplomatic level. The issue of the Biharis remained unresolved. Face of the camp changed every day along with the arrival of the new faces in the family. The Biharis became the 'citizens of nowhere'.

STAR PHOTO

New generation refugees in Mohammadpur Geneva Camp are confused about their identity.