

12,000 can perform Umrah in Ramadan

UNB, Dhaka

The government has decided to send up to 12,000 pilgrims to Saudi Arabia to perform Umrah during Ramadan.

The decision came at a meeting yesterday, with Religious Affairs Adviser ASM Matur Rahman in the chair.

As there had been a stalemate over sending pilgrims to perform Umrah because of the failure of 19 out of 24 approved Umrah agencies to deposit 'bank guarantees', the government took effective steps to resolve the problem.

Now the Saudi authorities will receive Umrah pilgrims through four authorised agencies following an understanding reached between the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Umrah agencies.

High officials and owners of the Umrah agencies were present at the meeting.

Army man held on charges of extortion in Ctg

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

The police held an army man as he was allegedly extorting money in the guise of a member of the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) from a residential hotel in the city early yesterday.

He was identified as Mohammad Azad Ali, a soldier.

Sources said Azad, wearing the jacket of Rab and identifying himself as a Rab member, entered Hotel Al Amin at around 1:30am and demanded money from the hotel manager.

He also beat the manager and boarders of the hotel, and took away their money and valuables by issuing threats to them.

Receiving information, a patrol team of Kotwali Police Station rushed to the spot and challenged him.

Azad could not show any identity card and confessed that he is an army man, said Duty Officer of Kotwali Sub-Inspector Bashir.

Officer-in-Charge Kazi Hanif Islam said they handed Azad over to the army authority as per rule for taking departmental action.

Charge framed against BNP leader Ariful in extortion case

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Sylhet

A court in Sylhet yesterday framed charge against city BNP Chief Ariful Haque Chowdhury, also a ward commissioner of Sylhet City Corporation (SCC), in a case of extortion worth Tk 15 lakh.

Additional District and Sessions Judge Mahfuzur Rahman fixed August 22 for recording the deposition of witnesses.

Contractor Haji Dilar Ahmed, son of Haji Mujibur Rahman of Shahjalal Upashahar, filed the case with Sylhet Kotwali Police Station on June 19.

In his case, Dilar alleged that Ariful Haque Chowdhury called him to his (Arif's) house at Kumarpara area and asked him to pay Tk 15 lakh in toll on March 30 in 2006.

Otherwise, the work order for a road expansion project would be cancelled and his firm would be blacklisted, Arif threatened.

"Later, I was compelled to pay the amount through six cheques of Sonali Bank, SCC Branch," Dilar mentioned in his complaint.

Sub-Inspector Iqbal Hossain submitted the charge sheet on July 17.



Army Chief General Moeen U Ahmed distributes seed and seedlings among flood-affected farmers at Deegrechar in Faridpur yesterday.

Pakistan aims to control organs trade

AFP, Islamabad

When a man called Tariq offered 24-year-old Usman Rana more than 16,000 dollars for one of his kidneys, he thought his fortune was made.

Soon after Rana arrived in the Pakistani capital Islamabad from his hometown Lahore in February in search of work, police said Tariq "lured him into selling one of his kidneys for one million rupees (16,666 dollars)."

A patient from Britain was the buyer, Rana was told, and he was given a down payment of 100,000 rupees, a fortune in the impoverished country, before being operated on in a private hospital just outside the capital.

Not long after the operation, as Rana's remaining kidney began to cause him pain, he still didn't have the rest of the money. So he started knocking on doors and ended up contacting police who uncovered a complicated scam.

Newspapers reported that four people, including a doctor and a policeman, appeared in court Friday in connection with Rana's case and were remanded in custody as police hunt for two more men, including a policeman.

According to Pakistan's government, Rana's story is not unusual and last week it introduced legislation aimed at controlling a lucrative illegal trade in human organs that preys on the "poorest of the poor."

Under the Transplantation of Human Organs and Tissues Bill, 2007, the unauthorised sale and transplantation of human organs will

be punishable with 10 years' jail and hefty fines.

The bill prohibits the sale of organs by Pakistanis to foreigners, who until now have come from across the world for life-saving operations that cost a fraction of the price at home, without the complications of waiting lists and legislation.

The bill said the sale of kidneys was on the rise and newspaper reports put the annual value of the trade in Pakistan at one billion rupees.

It's a trade that has made Pakistan infamous as an international human organs supermarket, with apocryphal stories -- such as unemployed men waking up in baths of ice to find a scar the only evidence of surgical theft -- hinting at the gruesome toll.

Most people who sell their kidneys do so to escape conditions of virtual slavery in the hope of paying off their debts and buying their freedom.

They almost never do, rather seeing the money they are promised for their organ siphoned off by middlemen and hospitals.

Rana told The News he had been unemployed for two years and was close to starvation when he moved to the capital and met a barber who talked him into selling a kidney to feed his family.

He didn't even get to keep the down payment. "When I came out of the hospital the three agents were waiting for me. They snatched 100,000 rupees saying that the total amount would be paid after complete recovery of my health."

Surveys quoted in Pakistani

media have found that 70 percent of the kidneys traded on the private market come from bonded labourers in rural Punjab province, the agricultural heartland of the country where most farmers are indentured to feudal landlords.

Forced to borrow from their landlords to cover costs of weddings, funerals and other traditional obligations, as well as indirect taxes, many believe selling a kidney for between 70,000 and 120,000 rupees will enable them to pay off their debts.

But 95 percent of those who sell a kidney remain desperately poor, according to Dawn newspaper. Their health deteriorates to the point where they cannot work and they are plagued by guilt and depression.

Dawn said Saturday that 2,000 kidney transplants are performed each year in Pakistan, 500 of them in government hospitals with the organs supplied by living relatives of the recipients.

The remaining 1,500 kidneys were from unrelated sellers, the transplants performed in private hospitals.

"About 900-1,000 of these are for foreigners who come from more than 20 countries in the Middle East, North America, Europe and South Asia and pay hefty amounts," Dawn said. "The rest are locals."

Rab nabs 10, seize firearm, smuggled goods in Rajshahi

BSS, Rajshahi

Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) in different drives seized a firearm, a statue, 356 bottles of phensidyl and smuggled goods and arrested 10 people from different places of the region in the last two days.

Acting on a tip-off, the Rab members recovered the phensidyl bottles and arrested five people in separate drives at different parts of Dinajpur, Rangpur and Joypurhat districts.

The arrestees were identified as Tazul Islam, 27, Anwar Hossain, 30, and Hassan Ali, 22, of Joypurhat and Abdul Mannan, 27, of Dinajpur and Abul Mian, 45, of Rangpur.

The Rab members also arrested three alleged muggers from different places in Rangpur. They were Syed Shamsuddin, 35, Solaiman, 30, and Joynal Abedeem, 32, and recovered a revolver, a cellphone and other lethal weapons from their possession.

They also seized huge Indian smuggled goods worth about Tk 3 lakh from Kuthipara area under Charghat upazila in Rajshahi district and a statue that weighs 50 kg from the possession of one Abdur Rahim, 35.

In another drive, the Rab members arrested two persons, facing criminal cases, from Gopinathpur village under Akkelpur upazila in Joypurhat district. They were Babu Sarder, 33, and Johurul Islam Shukur, 37.



A woman sits beside her diarrhoea-infected daughter and granddaughter at the International Centre for Diarrhoea Diseases Research, Bangladesh at Mohakhali in the capital as the diarrhoea situation in and around the city remained unchanged yesterday.

Cirdap meeting begins today

BSS, Dhaka

The three-day 23rd regular meeting of the Centre on Integrated Rural Development for Asia and Pacific (Cirdap) Technical Committee begins in Chiang Mai of Thailand today.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives and the national FAO committee of the royal Thai government is hosting the meeting, said a Cirdap press release.

Members of the technical committee and representatives with the

14 Cirdap member countries are expected to attend the meeting.

The meeting will discuss agendas like holding of the second ministerial meeting in 2009 in Bangladesh, operationalisation of new bilateral collaborative initiatives, new initiatives with other international/donor agencies, utilisation of the Regional Cooperation Fund (RCF), modalities of Cirdap link institutions in establishing network with regional organisations like Saarc ASEAN and ECO in collaboration with the

Centre, preparation of the rural development report-2009.

Dr Rungruang Isarangkura, deputy minister for agriculture and cooperatives of Thailand will inaugurate the meeting at the Empress Hotel in Chiang Mai.

Gerundio C Madueno, under secretary of the Department of Agrarian Reform of Philippines, Dr Silavanh Sawathvong, deputy director general of National Agriculture and Forestry Extension Services (NAFES) of Lao PDR are also expected to address the function.

2 lighter vessels yet to be salvaged

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

The two lighter vessels, one capsized near the Karnaphuli estuary and the other stranded at Sandwip channel on Saturday, could not be salvaged till yesterday afternoon.

The spot, where the lighter vessel MV Feroze Farzana capsized, could not be located due to rough weather and strong current in the sea, Port Radio Control sources said.

At a meeting with the owners of the vessels, the port authority directed them to retrieve the vessels as soon as possible, said CPA Secretary Syed Farhad Uddin Ahmad.

"It is not our responsibility to salvage the vessels as the accidents occurred outside our territory and the port channel is free

for movement," he added. Feroze Farzana with 700 tonnes of cement clinker sank in the Karnaphuli estuary near outer anchorage of the port due to stormy wind in the early hours of Saturday.

Lighter vessel Saima-3 with 1100 tonnes of crude oil remained stranded at a nearby riverbed in the offshore of Sandwip Channel.

High Speed Navigation, owner of the vessel, hired two private rescue boats for salvaging the vessels but failed due to stormy wind.

Mostafizur Rahman, operational executive of the firm, told The Daily Star over phone that they hired an empty oil tanker for unloading the oil from the stranded vessel.

Immobile policemen

FORM PAGE 1 for snatching, we are patrolling the streets on foot," said an officer-in-charge (OC) of a city police station. "How can one even expect that my forces will be able to catch these criminals by running?" he said.

The OC of another police station said police officials concerned used to illegally arrange transport for patrolling on their own initiative and buy the fuel with money earned through forbidden means.

"My morning starts with crime when I am assigned for patrol duty with no pick-up vans," said an SI of Mirpur PS. "Even if I can manage a vehicle illegally, I have to spend at least Tk 400 on fuel for the whole day and food for its driver...If I do not pocket money illegally, how will I manage all these costs?" he said.

An SI of Tejgaon PS said, "I know two of my colleagues who now set aside Tk 2,000 each every month after drawing their salaries to meet such expenditures."

He said most of their colleagues now do not take bribes fearing tough punitive action. A sentry of the police station recently lost his job after he was proved guilty of taking a bribe of Tk 10 from a visitor in exchange for allowing her to meet her relative in custody, he added.

The higher authorities have meanwhile strictly ordered not to take anyone's vehicle illegally. People have also become aware and do not give away their vehicles to the police without any payment, said police officials.

"Earlier, forces at different police stations used to manage vehicles illegally, but we have stopped this practice," said the DMP commissioner.

He, however, did not agree that criminal incidents have increased because of the severe crisis of patrol vehicles in the department. "A few incidents are taking place, which is usual, but we are working hard to contain crimes," Naim said.



Women from Muslim Girls' High School in Mymensingh at ID card registration and voter listing with photographs began yesterday.

Tourist boom a threat to Leh's Tibetan architecture

AFP, LEH, India

Perched high above the Himalayan town of Leh, a warren of traditional mud-brick houses squats by the ruins of the royal palace and a monastery, appearing to grow out of the mountain-side.

These homes in the capital of India's Buddhist Ladakh region which have stood for centuries are regarded as some of the best remaining examples of urban Tibetan-style architecture.

But conservationists are increasingly fretting about the survival of these medieval buildings in the Old Town which are now sadly dilapidated.

The New York-based World Monuments Fund in June put Leh's Old Town on a list of the world's 100 most endangered sites, citing a host of factors as cause for concern, including more rain from climate change in the usually arid region.

But although Leh last year received unusually heavy downpours that caused several of the flat roofs to cave in, a walk through the old area shows

that decades of plain neglect are more to blame than anything else.

"Since the last 15 years people have been moving away," said conservationist Andre Alexander, head of the Tibet Heritage Fund, which has been working for the last four years to restore buildings in Old Leh.

"There's been a build-up of infrastructure in the modern town. The contrast has helped to convince people there's no future in Old Town."

In the past, when Leh was more dependent on farming, people cultivated land in the valley and lived on the hillside.

But in the past decade tourism has boomed -- more than 40,000 people visited Ladakh last year alone, officials say -- and the money it brought in allowed more people to move down to the modern part of town.

"They no longer need to do farming so they have sold the farmland or built it up," said the pony-tailed Alexander, originally from Germany.

Many of the former farms are now hotels or large houses, and many of the traditional homes on the hillside

are empty.

Yet the three-floor houses are perfectly adapted for the cold, dry climate, with the thick walls great for keeping warmth in while numerous tall windows let in lots of sunshine.

They are beautiful too, with carved wooden window frames and narrow stairs that lead out to rooftop terraces that look out over the valley below.

Alexander's conservation group offers financing to locals still living in the area, mainly poor labourers, to help them restore their homes, which can cost as much as 1,250 dollars.

"Before the roof was coming down. The walls were creaking. There were many cracks," said Tsering Dorje, as he sipped butter tea made with yak's milk in his spruced-up house.

The impoverished mason got help from the group by offering to do all the work himself.

Alexander believes that as Tibet's capital, Lhasa, becomes more modern under Chinese rule, it has become more important than ever to protect Leh's architecture.

"In Lhasa there is not so much left.

The government had a very different vision of what Lhasa should be -- very modern," said Alexander who worked in Lhasa before moving to Leh in 2003. "Leh now has much more than Lhasa."

Tibet-influenced Ladakh shares many cultural similarities with its trans-Himalayan neighbour.

But Leh's Old Town is by and large still ignored by the authorities.

Most tourists stay in cheap guest-houses in the new part of town and eat in restaurants there, while the Old Town's unpaved alleys, infrequently cleaned, make it difficult for visitors to get to its temples and monasteries.

It does not yet have running water, though some observers note that with no proper sewage system in place, that is not such a bad thing.

"Definitely we are lacking a policy on that -- I have been always saying that," said Tsewang Rigzin, new tourism councillor for the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council.

"In the last 15 to 20 years there's been very bad planning for Leh.

Everything has gone on in a very haphazard manner."

Rigzin hopes the authorities will come up with a plan for the old area, but admits that the council lacks the funds to actually restore anything.

The World Monuments Fund said the authorities could at least do a better job of maintenance, as well as monitoring new construction.

"There are new buildings being built out of concrete and cement next to some of the historic mud-brick buildings. So there's a loss of character going on," fund technical director Mark Weber told AFP from New York.

"These buildings have survived centuries but some of them have not been attended to. Properly maintained, using traditional materials, these buildings can last for centuries more."