

5.70 lakh families to get food grains for 5 months

Govt to buy 1 lakh tonne rice from Vietnam; Rice prices drop further in 24 hours

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government will provide 5.70 lakh poorer families with food grains for five months under VGF programme and import 1 lakh tonnes of rice from Vietnam as part of its efforts to tackle the ongoing crisis.

A meeting of the advisory council chaired by Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed yesterday also decided that under open market sale (OMS), 45,000 metric tons of rice would be sold at Tk 25 a kg throughout January.

Meanwhile, rice prices on both retail and wholesale markets yesterday marked a further drop. Retailers sold the staple at a price down by Tk 2-3 a kg, but it was still

far from what is needed to ease public sufferings due to exorbitant prices, said market sources.

In another development, the Committee on Public Purchase has approved a proposal to buy 75,000 tonnes of rice from the international market, Finance Adviser Mirza Azizul Islam told reporters yesterday.

Foreign Adviser Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury in a press release the same day said Vietnam has decided to sell rice to Bangladesh though the country itself was badly hit by floods this year.

Quoting the Bangladesh ambassador in Hanoi, he said, "Vietnam may be able to sell 20,000 tonnes immediately. Procurement of the rest will follow the harvest in

February-March. To finalise the matter, a visit by a technical team from Dhaka may be necessary."

Earlier on Saturday, the chief adviser announced that the government has been working to import 10 lakh tonnes of rice from India, Thailand and Myanmar.

The announcement to import from Vietnam comes after the decision to import 1-2 lakh tonnes from Thailand, for which tenders have already been invited.

The advisory council at yesterday's meeting also weighed the possibility of rationing food for the middle class, said sources close to the administration.

Besides, it decided to assign two officials in every district to make sure agricultural inputs like ferti-

liser, seeds and irrigation facilities reach the farmers timely for Boro cultivation.

The government's new vulnerable group feeding (VGF) programme will run in parallel with its special VGF programme for 26 lakh families affected by Cyclone Sidr.

Meanwhile, a high-level government delegation is set to visit New Delhi to finalise the deal to purchase 5 lakh tonnes of rice from India by January 10.

According to the committee on purchase decisions yesterday, Mannan and Brothers will import 50,000 metric tons of non-basmati rice at the cost of \$1.98 crore while Mabco Foods will import 25,000

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Bimstec meet on poverty postponed

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The first Bimstec ministerial meeting on poverty alleviation scheduled to be held in Dhaka on January 9-10 has been postponed due to 'unavoidable reasons', said a press release.

The Bimstec (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) meeting would adopt a comprehensive poverty alleviation action plan in line with global Millennium Development Goals.

Senior officials from the seven member states were to hammer out agenda of the meeting on January 9 while ministers were to finalise and adopt the agenda on January 10.

The meeting, proposed by Dhaka, was approved at the 9th Bimstec ministerial meeting in New Delhi in 2006.

The postponement may delay the regional organisation's efforts to include poverty alleviation in the main agenda of its summit due this year in New Delhi.

Bimstec was formed on June 6, 1997 in Bangkok and its member countries are Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

Recruitment reforms hold little hope

PSC prefers to keep 55pc non-merit quota; academics decry the recommendation

SURANJITH DEABNATH

The new line-up of Public Service Commission (PSC) has failed to bring any change to the 55 percent quota system, which has long been branded as a bar to recruiting meritorious officials in the civil service.

The PSC had earlier sent a set of recommendations to the establishment ministry to amend the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) recruitment rules. But the commission did not say anything about the quota system, although previous PSC bodies on several occasions suggested its curtailment.

"A whole lot of changes are being introduced in the BCS recruitment rules following analysis of the recommendations sent by the PSC," Establishment Secretary

BCS SEATS RESERVED

■ Freedom fighters	30%
■ Women	10%
■ Disadvantaged dists	10%
■ Indigenous people	5%

Abdus Salam Khan told The Daily Star. But the PSC did not mention anything about the quota system, he added.

He however said at this moment they have no plan to abolish or curtail the existing quota. "I personally think time has not come yet to abolish the system. It will be abolished when the government thinks it necessary."

Only 45 percent of the public

servants are selected on merit. The remaining of both cadre and non-cadre service holders includes 30 percent freedom fighters or their offspring, 10 percent women, 10 percent residents of certain districts and five percent indigenous people.

Academics, former and present PSC members and jobseekers have long been pointing out that "unskilled or semi-skilled" candidates often pass the BCS exams thanks to the quota system.

A secretariat committee has already approved the draft proposal of the BCS recruitment rules designed by the establishment ministry following the PSC recommendations.

Establishment ministry sources said the draft is now being checked

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CASE AGAINST DU TEACHERS

Court declares prosecution witness hostile

COURT CORRESPONDENT

A prosecution witness was declared 'hostile' yesterday for concealing facts in one of the two cases filed against four teachers and 15 students of Dhaka University (DU) for violating the Emergency Power Rules (EPR) in August last year.

Metropolitan Magistrate Habibur Rahman Siddiqui declared Dewan Safayet Ahmed, a fourth-year student of Social Welfare and Research Institute, hostile after the prosecution submitted a petition.

Three witnesses gave their statements before the same court yesterday. They were cross-examined by the defence lawyers of the four teachers and a student, who are in jail custody.

But they did not say anything against the teachers or the students.

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People through a BDR-run fair price outlet on Satmasjid Road in Dhanmondi to buy essentials yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

Files of Niko graft cases to be seized soon

UNB, Dhaka

Files and documents relating to the Niko graft cases filed against former prime ministers Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) will be seized soon.

On December 9, ACC filed two separate cases against Khaleda, Hasina and eight others for alleged corruption and irregularities in awarding deals to Niko, a Canadian gas-and-oil-exploration company.

Sources said the files and documents concerning the Khaleda case would be seized within "two to four days" while those related to the case against Hasina would be seized within January 15.

"Letters have already been sent" to ministries concerned, Petrobangla and Bangladesh Petroleum Exploration Company in this regard, the sources said.

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Govt continues to be called caretaker

Rules HC rejecting a writ petition to term it interim govt, to appoint more advisers

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court (HC) yesterday rejected a writ petition that sought a change in the nomenclature of the present government to call it an 'interim government' instead of a 'caretaker government', and sought permission to appoint more advisers for it for smooth functioning of the administration.

Saying that there is no mention in the country's constitution of any interim government, an HC bench that was hearing the petition said the incumbent government will continue to be termed a 'caretaker government'. The rejection also

blocked expansion of the cabinet.

The two-member HC bench, however, said the court might hear a new petition regarding failure of the Election Commission (EC) to hold the pending general election within 90 days of dissolution of the last parliament, if the petitioner files one.

Advocate Masood R Sobhan, who filed the public interest litigation writ petition on December 13 last year, told The Daily Star last night over the phone that the court rejected his petition as 'not pressed'.

He said he is pondering filing of a new petition challenging the EC

decision to hold the election in 2008 'in violation of the constitution through failing to hold it within the stipulated 90 days period'.

During the hearing yesterday, Sobhan said the present government that took over office after dissolution of the eighth parliament was called a 'caretaker government'. Article 58 of the constitution determines the formation and mandates of the caretaker government.

The constitution says a caretaker government will comprise no more than 10 advisers and a chief

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Edible oil importers ask govt to drop tax

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The importers and refiners of the country yesterday called on the government to relax value added tax (VAT) and other levies on the import of edible oil to keep the domestic market stable.

They raised the demand at a meeting with Commerce Secretary Feroz Ahmed in Dhaka.

At present local merchants have to pay 18 percent tax, including 15 percent VAT, one percent landing charge and two percent other taxes, on the import of crude edible oil.

MA Rouf Chowdhury, chairman of Bangladesh Vegetable Oil Refiners and Vanaspathi Manufacturers Association, led the importers and refiners in the meeting which officials from finance and home ministries, Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB),

National Board of Revenue and industrialists also attended.

Rouf Chowdhury told The Daily Star after the meeting that they have urged the government to waive all taxes on the import of edible oil to keep the market steady.

He said the meeting tried to find a way to reduce the skyrocketing prices of edible oil in the local market.

"We've no hand in the price hike of crude edible oil because international-market players determine the price. Bangladeshi edible oil market doesn't matter much in the global market as ours is a very small consuming country. But, the government can take necessary measures to tame the rising trend of edible oil," Chowdhury said.

Fakhru Alam, country chief of

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Hasina won't go abroad with strings attached

Physicians urge govt to send her to US for better treatment

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Detained Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina would not go abroad for medical treatment if the government imposes any condition on her, party's acting President Zillur Rahman said yesterday.

"If any condition is imposed or direction is given to Hasina prior to her going abroad for treatment, she obviously will not go," Zillur said.

The AL leader was talking to the reporters outside a makeshift court set up on the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban premises where hearing on charge-framing in a case against Hasina had been going on. Yesterday's hearing, however, did not take place as Hasina could not appear before the court due to

illness.

Meanwhile, four physicians treating the former premier yesterday appealed to the chief adviser of the caretaker government to send Hasina to the US for better medical treatment.

The Dhaka Metropolitan Sessions Judge's court fixed tomorrow as the next date of hearing on charge framing in the Tk 3 crore extortion case filed by businessman Azam J Chowdhury against Hasina and two others.

This is for the second time Hasina could not attend the hearing after she fell ill at the special court on December 31, 2007.

The court of Judge Azizul Haque passed the order as soon as the

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A vendor on a rickshaw-van sells clothes at Basabo in the capital yesterday. Hawkers have recently been evicted again from city footpaths.

PHOTO: STAR

Heist in N'ganj Agrani Bank

OUR CORRESPONDENT, N'ganj

Robbers have looted Tk 55,000 from the vault of Agrani Bank Mir Jumla Branch on Shayesta Khan Road in Narayanganj.

Bank officials came to know about the heist after they entered the bank yesterday morning.

Police detained security guard Hironir Sardar for grilling.

Hironir told the police that a gang of four robbers stormed the bank at about 2:00am and held him hostage at gunpoint. They entered the building cutting grills of a window.

The robbers looted the money from the vault and escaped.

However, police in primary investigation found his statement to be false. Hironir's wife and son told the law enforcers that he was at home on Saturday night.

A case was filed with Narayanganj Police Station.



A group of drug addicts take part in a counselling programme under the 'HIV and STD Prevention Project for Drug Users' at a hospital run by Dhaka Ahsania Mission in old Dhaka.

PHOTO: STAR

All addict rehab centres operate illegally

Most of the 115 clinics in city lacks trained doctors

SHARIFUL ISLAM and SHAHEEN MOLLAH

Although the law makes it mandatory for all drug addiction treatment and rehabilitation centres to obtain licenses from the Department of Narcotics Control (DNC), none of the 115 such centres in the capital has any.

Almost all of those centres also do not have any trained doctor and nurse despite a gazette notification by the home ministry on July 2, 2005 making it mandatory for those centres to have full-time doctors, psychiatrists, and trained nurses.

With absolutely no monitoring by DNC, which is responsible for the job, the centres are virtually run

by people who are tantamount to quacks, resulting in a majority of the patients relapsing into the addiction even after getting treatment or after being 'rehabilitated'. An investigation by The Daily Star revealed that even former heroin addicts are running a number of those centres.

The capital witnessed a mushrooming of drug addict treatment and rehab centres over the years as the business has proven to be a money churner. A recent DNC survey reveals that there are 115 drug addiction treatment and rehab centres in the capital, all of which are operating without any license.

When contacted, Joint Secretary (administration) to the Home

Ministry Mostafizur Rahman said the director general (DG) of DNC is the appropriate authority for looking after the matter. He advised these correspondents to talk to him.

DNC DG Humayun Kabir told The Daily Star that they are working to ensure that the treatment clinics and rehab centres stay alert about the responsibilities vested upon them.

In the face of total flouting of the government guidelines by the clinic authorities, the government is now mulling a plan for slackening the guidelines, said a DNC director seeking anonymity.

Mohor Ali, who has been into heroin for the last 15 years,

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New Zealand bruise Tigers

AFP, Dunedin

New Zealand's inspired bowlers wrecked Bangladesh's hopes of survival in the first Test here Sunday, setting up a comfortable nine-wicket win with more two days to spare.

Bangladesh started the day at a confident 148-0 in their second innings, but within two sessions the game was over.

New Zealand knocked off all ten wickets for 106 runs to have the tourists all out for 254, and then cruised to the 35-run target for victory for the loss of one wicket.

First innings centurion Matthew Bell, recalled to the Test arena for the first time since 2001, was unbeaten on 20 while Peter Fulton ended the game with a six to remain not out 15.

On an easy wicket, neither of Bangladesh's Test debutant openers Tamim Iqbal and Zunaed Siddiqui were able to convert their strong start to the second innings into maiden centuries as Tamim added just 12 and Zunaed 5 to their overnight scores of 72 and 69 respectively.

Together they had established a record 161-run opening partnership for Bangladesh, which was to be one of the few highlights the visitors could take from the Test.

Their other significant achievement was to make New Zealand bat

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Four grenades, SMG seized in Jessore

BSS, Jessore

Police yesterday recovered four grenades, one sub-machine gun (SMG) and 167 rounds of bullet at Balianpur of Monirampur upazila in the district.

Officer-in-charge of Monirampur Police Station told the journalists that a group of children found a grenade while playing near a farm at Balianpur.

On information, police rushed to the spot and recovered the arms and ammunition.