

Wholesale prices

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The retail prices are not yet reflecting the falling trend at the wholesale markets because the commodities that are being sold now had been purchased from wholesale markets at higher prices earlier, explained the retailers.

The price of each 50-kg sack of pulse dropped by Tk 300 to Tk 500 in the last three days on the wholesale markets while the price of edible oil plummeted by Tk 600 per maund (37.20 kg) in the last two weeks.

Price of sugar also came down by Tk 300 on each 50-kg sack at wholesale markets during the last week. The price of each 74-kg sack of flour also declined by Tk 300.

The falling wholesale price of sugar -- down to Tk 1,700 from Tk 2,000 for a 50-kg sack in the last few days -- had a slight impact on the retail market yesterday.

Sugar was selling at Tk 38 to Tk 40 per kg yesterday while it was sold at Tk 40 to Tk 42 a week back.

A kg of high quality pulse -- Australian Kangaroo and local variety, was sold at Tk 96 and Tk 94 respectively at wholesale markets a week ago. The Australian Kangaroo pulse was selling at Tk 88 a kg yesterday while the high quality local pulse price came down to Tk 84 a kg.

A kg of Turkish pulse was selling at Tk 74 to Tk 75 at the retail markets yesterday while the price of the same was Tk 82 a week ago.

Hasan Uddin, owner of Hasan and Sons at Rahmatganj Dal Patti, country's largest pulse market, told The Daily Star that falling prices on international market and the availability of local pulses triggered the price decrease on the wholesale markets.

The wholesale prices of edible oil, flour and sugar also continued to fall during the last couple of days.

Non-brand soybean oil was selling for Tk 3,700 per maund at the wholesale markets yesterday as opposed to Tk 4,300 two weeks ago.

However, the retail price of non-brand soybean oil was between Tk 105 and Tk 110 a kg yesterday.

The wholesale prices of 'super palm' and palm oil were Tk 3,450 and Tk 3,300 per maund yesterday while the price was Tk 4000 and Tk 3900 two weeks back.

A kg of 'super palm' and palm oil was selling at Tk 100 and Tk 95 per kg at the retail markets.

Abul Hashem, general secretary of Bangladesh Wholesale Edible Oil Merchants' Association and organising secretary of Bangladesh Wholesale Sugar Merchants' Association, said reduced price on

the international market and adequate supply of edible oil and sugar contributed to their falling prices.

Wholesale price of a 74-kg sack of flour dropped to Tk 3,000 from Tk 3,300 in the last couple of days, without making any impact on the retail market. A kg of flour was selling for Tk 44 to Tk 47 on the retail markets yesterday.

Flour wholesalers at Moulvibazar also said the price fall of wheat on the international market resulted the price decrease.

Fish prices increased by Tk 10 to Tk 100 per kg on both retail and wholesale markets, with hilsa being the priceiest.

Chicken (farm) prices yesterday jumped to Tk 85-Tk 90 a kg from Tk 80 two days back. The price of domestic chickens also rose by Tk 10 to Tk 20 a piece yesterday.

Egg prices spiked by Tk 1 per 'hali' (four eggs) on the retail markets last week. Eggs (farm) were selling at Tk 17 to Tk 20 per hali yesterday while regular eggs were selling at Tk 22 to Tk 24 per hali.

UNB added: BDR Director General Maj Gen Shakil Ahmed yesterday urged the business leaders to import more and make less profit as a measure to help contain the spiraling prices.

"Though the food prices are high on the international market, the prices in Bangladesh are much higher in comparison to that. It cannot be allowed to go. But we don't want to interfere, you should take immediate steps in this regard," he told the business leaders.

The BDR chief was exchanging views with the importers and leaders of various business forums at Moulvibazar Business Association office in Old Dhaka.

Director General of Rab Hasan Mahmud, army Dhaka zone operation officer Col Mujibul Haq, Badamtali Rice Traders' Association Secretary Haji Nizamuddin, Edible Oil Importers' Association Secretary Abul Hsahem and Sugar Importers' Association president Ali Asgar Kamal, among others, attended the meeting chaired by Moulvibazar Business Association President Abur Razzak.

Assuring the businessmen of providing all possible help for import, storage and marketing their goods, Gen Shakil urged them to do business in a manner so that the common people do not suffer from unusual price hike.

In response, the business leaders called for formulating a specific policy for import, export, storage and

marketing so that they can do their business without harassment.

The businessmen attributed the soaring prices of essentials to the price hike of goods on the international market, short supply of food and sharp fall in production in Bangladesh due to two consecutive floods and Cyclone Sidr.

They said the government can also import goods through TCB apart from the private importers.

SCBA polls

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At the meeting decided to carry over the date to the last week of April on requests from the government side.

Complications rose after Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) Sunday slapped a ban on holding the election for what they said was the SCBA's not having the permission as required by the emergency powers.

However, yesterday's meeting was unanimous in its opinion that there is no need for permission to hold the polls, Barrister Amir added.

The talks were held at a Gulshan guest house since everyone involved preferred a neutral venue. Law Adviser Hassan Arif was there from 10:00am to 12:00pm.

Five of six presidential candidates barrister Shafique Ahmed, Humayun Hossain Khan, Khandaker Mahbub Hossain, Saifur Reza and Sirajul Islam Khan -- were present at the meeting.

Later in the evening, the leaders gathered at the SCBA building where Convenor of the election committee Nizamul Haque Nasim announced the new dates.

Attorney General Fida M Kamal was among those present at that time.

Earlier in the morning, a good number of lawyers thronged the SCBA building to cast vote. But the bar leaders told them the voting would remain stalled as they were going to have a meeting with the government. Many of those who massed on the SC premises expressed resentment.

A large contingent of police was deployed to avert any untoward.

Black night

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The one-minute blackout as a symbol of a journey from the dark to a brighter future.

SCF has urged all the citizens of the country to observe the one-minute blackout in silence from wherever they be -- in houses, motor vehicles, launches or anywhere else -- in remembrance of the black night Bangladeshis were thrown into and massacred in hundreds.

Ektattor Ghatok Dalal Nirmul Committee, a forum for secular Bangladesh, in a separate programme will arrange a candlelight procession tonight from the Central Shaheed Minar to the killing field of Jagannath Hall of the University of Dhaka where many were brutally killed on that fateful night of 1971.

They will hold a discussion meeting at the Central Shaheed Minar before commencing the candlelight procession.

Projonmo Ektattor, an organisation of the children of martyred intellectuals, will join the discussion and procession.

University of Development Alternative (UODA) will stage various programmes after sunset today that will continue till sunrise on Independence Day.

UODA will arrange a nightlong programme of painting, poetry recitation and patriotic songs with the participation of renowned singers of Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra, and a film show to pay homage to the sacred memory of the martyrs of the Liberation War.

Two cops held

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DB officials said they first arrested SI Selim Mollah after identifying him as one of the culprits. Following his statement, they arrested SI Amiruzzaman.

Police produced the two before the Dhaka Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's court and prayed for their five-day remand.

The police mentioned in the forwarding report that the two need to be remanded to identify their cohorts and arrest them.

Ripon Mia, a Bangladeshi expatriate in Saudi Arabia, came to Dhaka from his ancestral home in Kishoreganj on Friday afternoon to convert Saudi riyals into taka.

When he got down from a bus at Mohakhali Bus Terminal, a gangled by the two SIs forced him to board a microbus, identifying them as policemen.

They took him to a remote place in Savar and snatched 86,000 Saudi Riyals and a mobile phone from him. Later, they pushed Ripon out of the vehicle.

Ripon returned to the capital and filed a case with Tejgaon Police Station on Saturday.

Sources said Selim and Amir are among the 8,000 Sub-inspectors, who allegedly gave bribes to get appointed in police force in 2005.

During interrogation at the DB office, they said they had to hand Tk 7 lakh to give bribe to top police officials and political leaders for getting their jobs and they had to resort to unfair means as they had failed to repay the loan in the last two years.

Govt to sit with parties

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An immediate start of the dialogue, the military-backed administration now does not want to wait for the Election Commission (EC) to wrap up the electoral reforms talks first to begin its own, said insiders.

An official announcement will be made soon after the government finalises matters relating to negotiations with the political parties, they added.

"How long can they afford to wait," a person close to the advisory council told The Daily Star yesterday, explaining the reason why the government is planning to begin the talks in the first week of April.

Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed in his address to the nation on January 12 announced that the council of advisers had decided in favour of having dialogue with the political parties. He also said his administration would soon take steps to that end.

But later, a number of advisers said the government's talks would not take place before the EC completes its reforms dialogue that seems to have lost way in legal quagmire stemming from leadership dispute in BNP.

The commission began second round of its talks on February 24 and had discussions with 15 parties in five days. But it could not finish off the job since it must wait for the BNP issue to be resolved at the High Court.

"The government should have begun the talks soon after its decision to that end on January 10. Things could have been much better in that case," observed the adviser.

Those who have been invited to the electoral talks are likely to be asked to join the discussions with the government too.

The political parties look to raise

a myriad of current issues while the caretaker government would want them to reach a consensus over vital national issues.

Complete withdrawal of restrictions on indoor politics across the country would figure in the topics of the talks, a source said.

Besides, a decision on whether to relax or lift the state of emergency might come after the dialogue.

Earlier in February, the EC urged the chief adviser to lift the restrictions on indoor politics country-wide at the end of March to allow the political parties to resume their activities and prepare to register with it by June.

EC wants army

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military for maintaining law and order during union parishad elections.

Election Commissioner Sakhawata also said the EC is working on a proposal aimed at taking punitive measures against polling officials and law enforcers including members of the armed forces for any act to influence the elections.

If any allegation is lodged with the commission, it will investigate it, he said adding that once the individual involved is found to be guilty, the commission would ask the authorities concerned to take departmental action against the accused.

"In case of criminal offences, actions might be taken under existing laws," said Sakhawata.

Persuading one to cast vote, dissuade one from casting vote and any other act that would influence someone during the voting or have impact on poll results would be considered punishable offences, said sources.

Charge sheet

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"The charge sheet in the illegal wealth case against Tarique can get approval from the commission [ACC] any moment and it can be done in this week," said ACC Director General (admin) Col Hanif Iqbal in a routine press briefing yesterday.

"Scrutiny of the investigation report in the case against Tarique has been completed. It is at the final stage and awaits approval from the commission to be placed as a charge sheet," Hanif added.

Sources in the ACC said the investigation report submitted to the ACC by the ACC investigation officer (IO) Assistant Director Taufiqul Islam proposed charging Tarique with earning wealth of about Tk 4.81 crore illegally.

The IO submitted the investigation report in January but two months were spent in just scrutinising the report.

The ACC filed the case against Tarique Rahman, his wife Dr Zubaida Rahman and mother-in-law Iqbalma Banu in connection with amassing wealth illegally and concealing wealth information.

In the first information report (FIR), Tarique was charged with gaining wealth over Tk 4.82 crore illegally and concealing information about properties worth over Tk 4.23 crore in his wealth statement submitted to the ACC.

Tarique submitted his wealth statement to the anti-graft body on June 10 through jail authorities, claiming to have assets worth Tk 1.37 crore in his name, his wife's and his daughter's name.

On March 7, the joint forces arrested Tarique at their cantonment home. He has since been in jail.

His mother Khaleida Zia and younger brother Arafat Rahman Koko were also arrested on September 3 on graft charges.

There are 11 other extortion and deception charges filed against Tarique and none of them are under trial.

Meanwhile, a Dhaka court rejected the bail petition of

detained BNP Senior Joint Secretary General Tarique Rahman in connection with the general diary (GD) filed with Kafrul Police Station in connection with his alleged involvement in corruption.

Our court correspondent reports: Judge Mohammad Azizul Haque of the Metropolitan Sessions Judge's Court passed the order after defence lawyers submitted a petition seeking bail for their client against the rejection order of the lower court.

On March 15 last year, the same court had rejected Tarique's bail petition saying that it had no jurisdiction to grant bail to any person in connection with the case filed under the EPR.

In the GD, police mentioned that during the four-party alliance's rule Tarique himself, his party friends and business partners earned a large amount of money through unbridled corruption in local and foreign tenders.

There is no legality of the source of his earnings, according to the GD.

Besides this, he amassed a huge amount of money taking commission from those who earned illegal money by appointing people to different posts in the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism.

Moreover, he siphoned off crores of taka which he earned through manipulating tenders using his, other family members' and business partners' influences in purchasing CNG-run auto-rickshaws, setting up power plants and manufacturing electric poles which caused huge loss to the government, reads the GD.

Police said Tarique needs to be confined to jail to prevent him from such activities.

Later, he was shown arrested in ten extortion cases and one in which he is accused of cheating, following confessional statements of his close friend and business associate Giasuddin Al Mamun.

The ACC also filed a graft case against Tarique, his wife and mother-in-law for accumulating huge wealth through illegal means.

WFP seeks \$500m

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Sheeran warned, without the food aid, WFP would have to reduce its global food aid operations because of rising food and oil prices.

WFP Acting Country Director Edward Kallon told The Daily Star last night that the food and funds shortfalls are also affecting the UN organisation's operation in Bangladesh, which is among the 40 countries being closely monitored for food shortages.

"Bangladesh is being closely monitored because of the increased food needs due to the cyclone emergency and the large number of poor people who cannot access the markets, especially the 27 million ultra poor," said Kallon.

Kallon said WFP is still assessing the shortfall in its food aid to Bangladesh, which is as a whole estimated at 5 lakh ton at the moment.

"The shortfall is affecting the emergency food assistance to areas affected by cyclone Sidr," said Kallon adding that WFP has received only \$37 million in response to the \$52 million

requested in the emergency appeal in the aftermath of Sidr.

The US Agency for International Development (USAID), WFP's biggest donor with a billion dollars a year donation, was forced to cut \$120 million from future aid programmes to pay for emergency aid needs.

Recently, regional WFP officials expressed fears of political and social unrest in Bangladesh due to soaring food prices, while International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) told the media, "This is a serious security issue."

In WFP's letter to donors, Sheeran wrote, "This is the new face of hunger, increasingly affecting communities that had previously been protected."

Some global food analysts forecast that bringing down food prices could take at least a decade, especially due to rising oil prices and increasing food demand in China and India.

Additionally, rising meat consumption has pushed up the demand for grains used as animal feed, which in turn has reduced land use for food grains.

Saifur calls

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occasion of the Independence Day. "But we should remain alert so that any individual cannot capture everything in the name of democracy," he said adding that they would work for establishing an accountable democratic system in the country.

Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, former secretary general of BNP, hoped that the parliamentary election would be held as per the electoral roadmap.

"I hope the elections will be held timely in a congenial atmosphere after completion of the voter list," he said.

He also said those who don't want to bring unity in the party are not friends of BNP.

"I want to tell you that unity will be brought in the party and nationalistic forces centring BNP would be united before the election," he added.

Maj (retd) Hafizuddin Ahmed, acting secretary general of the pro-Saifur faction, said democracy would be established soon in the country.

If anyone tries to create obstacles in the way to democracy, he would find himself in troubled waters, he said.

"Despite huge allegations against politicians, now it is proved that only politicians can run the country properly," he said.

Maj Gen (retd) ZA Khan, MA Hakim, Shah Abul Hossain, Nazir Hossain, Zahiruddin Swapan, Fazlul Azim, Mofazzal Karim, Prof Jasim Uddin Ahmed, and Tareq Shamsur Rahman, among others, spoke.

EC talks

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The court also adjourned until April 10 the hearing on another writ of similar nature in the form of Public Interest Litigation (PIL) filed by Nasir Uddin Ashim, a BNP leader.

On November 4 last year, the High Court, upon Ashim's writ, had issued a rule upon the EC and the government to explain why they should not be directed to invite legitimate BNP officials for the pre-election dialogue on electoral reforms.

The BNP leadership dispute arose when on November 5 last year the EC, ignoring Khaleida-appointed BNP Secretary General Khandaker Delwar Hossain, sent a letter to Maj (Retd) Hafiz Uddin Ahmed to participate in the dialogue with political parties on electoral reforms.

Aggrieved at the decision, Khaleida Zia, also the immediate past premier, moved to the High Court for seeking redress.

On November 18 the same year, the High Court, responding to Khaleida's writ, had stayed operation of the EC letter to the BNP standing committee-nominated acting Secretary General, Maj Hafiz, causing the Election Commission to inconclusively conclude the crucial first round of its reform dialogue with political parties.

The court also had issued a rule upon the EC, the acting secretary general and six members of the BNP standing committee and the chief adviser of the caretaker government to explain why the impugned letter 'should not be declared illegal'.

Cops foil

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gathered in front of the Communist Party's Paltan office at 10:00 am yesterday for the programme.

A contingent of police including the assistant commissioner of Motijheel and officer-in-charge of the Paltan police station had been deployed in the area beforehand.

Members of the law enforcement agency at one point snatched away banners and placards from protesting activists and forced them to leave the place, telling them that they cannot hold a hunger strike there.

Police then tried to bar the gathered leaders and activists from marching towards DLA's Tophkhana Road office to stage the protest there.

Pedestrians spontaneously joined the march protesting the price hike and demanding availability of essentials at lower prices while the DLA leaders and activists moved towards its office at Tophkhana.

DLA leaders and activists claim that at one point, the police charged baton on a section of the marching crowd.

Assistant Sub-Inspector of Paltan police station has however denied the allegation.

"We just requested them to leave the place and not stage their protest as such programmes are not allowed under the Emergency Powers Act," ASI Shajahan of Paltan police station told The Daily Star last night.

The police didn't attack the crowd, he said.

Communist Party of Bangladesh and Workers Party have criticised the police interference at the DLA programme and the attack on the crowd.

Zonayed Saki, Comrade Tipu Biswas, Abdullah Sarker, Saiful Hak, advocate Abdus Salam, Moshrefa Mishu, Abdul Matin Talukder, Hamidul Haq, Babul Biswas, among others, were present at the protest.

Kingdom of Bhutan

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The switch to democracy is a major step for Bhutan, which is about the size of Switzerland and is one of the most insular countries on the planet.

Before the king's dynasty took over in 1907, the country was divided up into countless local fiefdoms. It had no roads, telephones or currency until the 1960s, and only allowed television in 1999.

The landlocked country, which calls itself "The Land of the Thunder Dragon", was also never colonised. For centuries the Bhutanese relished their isolation, maintaining a barter economy and allowing few foreigners to visit.

The educated elite have traditionally dominated politics, and indeed only university graduates were allowed to stand for the 47 seats in the new National Assembly.

The candidates represented two parties, the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) or Bhutan United Party and the People's Democratic Party (PDP), which campaigned on the slogan: "Service with Humility: We Walk the Talk."

Both parties promised to stick by the royal concept of Gross National Happiness, but also pledged to boost growth and develop roads and

other infrastructure.

Election officials at polling stations handed out badges reading "I voted in the National Assembly Elections 2008."

"We are very excited. It's a very proud moment for us because of the way democracy has started. We didn't have to fight for it," said Tshewang Tashi, a 41-year-old civil servant.

Pema, a 28-year-old teacher, said the idea of democratic change was good news -- but still somewhat troubling.

"We are very happy. Sometimes we worry because it's a new system. We don't know if the prime minister will serve like the king," she said.

Tsherp Dorji, 25, said Bhutan's "sovereignty and security" would be safer if the king had remained in full control.

The kingdom's move to democracy began in 2001 when former king Jigme Singye Wangchuck handed over daily government to a council of ministers and finally stepped down in favour of his son in late 2006.

An election commission spokesman said the vote counting had started. Preliminary results were expected later in the day, with final official results due on Tuesday.

Top al-Qaeda leader

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As-Sahab information network on Sunday and monitored here by SITE Intelligence Group.

Zawahiri urged the faithful to "monitor the targets, collect the money, bring the equipment, plan accurately, and then -- while depending on Allah -- storm, seeking martyrdom and paradise."

The address became the second public message coming from the al-Qaeda leadership in less than a week.

On March 20, Osama Bin Laden insisted in a similar appeal to his followers that the only way to liberate Palestine is through negotiations or dialogue, but "iron and fire."

He also urged Muslims to participate in military operations against US forces in Iraq as a means of fighting for Muslim holy places in Jerusalem.

Zawahiri's message coincided with a visit to the West Bank by US Vice President Dick Cheney, who warned on Sunday that attacks on Israel by Palestinian militants were killing hopes for their "long overdue" state.

Cheney made his first trip as vice president to the West Bank for talks with moderate president Mahmud Abbas, following a string of meetings with Israeli leaders, with whom he also discussed Israel's arch foe Iran.

In the speech titled "Rush to

Support Our People in Gaza", Zawahiri blasts what he sees as collusion between the United States, Israel, Egypt, and other Arab states against the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip and its people.

He accuses Israel and its allies of restricting access for Palestinians to the most basic necessities and killing them. The al-Qaeda leader also encourages Muslims to support Palestinians through decisive actions against these states, rather than demonstrating their disapproval by other means.

"Let us strike their interests everywhere, just like they gathered against us from everywhere," Zawahiri said. "Let it be known to them that they will get blood for every dollar they spend in the killing of the Muslims, and for every bullet they fire against us, a volcano will turn back on them."

He insisted that Israeli warplanes were bombing people in Gaza "based on the American decision, the Egyptian siege, and Arab collusion."

"They will never be able to insult and make a mockery out of our Prophet, peace and prayers of Allah upon him," Zawahiri went on to conclude. "They cannot expect to support Israel, then live in peace and enjoyment while the Jews are killing our fugitive and surrounded people."

Gilani elected

FROM PAGE 16
teenage son Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, sitting in the public gallery, wiped away tears and then shook hands with Gilani.

"Today, democracy has been restored thanks to the great sacrifice of Benazir Bhutto," the 55-year-old Gilani, wearing a dark suit and tie, said in his first speech to parliament.

"I invite all political forces to join us because the country is facing such a crisis that a single man cannot save it," he said.

Just after his election Gilani on Monday ordered the