

HYBRID RICE

Continued use of imported seeds threat to soil fertility

Say scientists

PORIMOL PALMA and M RAHMAN LITON

Cultivation of hybrid rice varieties with imported seeds is spreading fast across the country for better harvest although these varieties require higher amount of inputs and degrade agricultural land.

The government is encouraging cultivation of hybrid rice ignoring the fact that huge import of these sterile varieties will make farmers dependent on multinational seed companies, experts said.

Hybrid varieties of foreign seeds demand more fertilisers, pesticides and water, firstly because these are high yielding and secondly because these are not developed to thrive in local climate conditions, scientists said.

The government planned cultivation of hybrid varieties on 10 lakh hectares in the upcoming Boro season, which will require around 14,000 tonnes of seeds, said an official of the agriculture ministry.

Of the required seed, companies will import around 11,000 tonnes from China, India or Philippines while a number of companies and NGOs will locally produce around 2,500 tonnes. Bangladesh Agriculture Development Corporation (BADC) produced only 50 tonnes of hybrid seeds for the Boro season this year, the official said.

In the last boro season, hybrid rice was cultivated on nearly eight lakh hectares out of the 45 lakh hectares of land brought under annual Boro cultivation, the official said, adding that last year 1,000 tonnes of hybrid seeds was produced locally.

"The government encourages hybrid rice varieties considering the better harvest. Food security is a matter of concern, we need more yield," said Anwar Faruque, director general of the seed wing of the Ministry of Agriculture.

Locally produced high-yielding varieties, including BR-29, produce five to six

tonnes per hectare while the Chinese hybrids produce six to seven tonnes per hectare, he said.

Scientists say that the country's need for more high-yielding varieties is not being questioned but the goal should not be achieved by destroying the soil and underground water resources. The only option should be developing hybrid varieties locally, they suggested.

"Our country's photoperiodic [duration of daylight] pattern, climatic condition and quality of soil and other factors involved in hybrid cultivation are not the same as the countries in which the varieties were invented," said Prof SS Imamul Huq of the Department of Soil, Water and Environment at Dhaka University.

If temperature at night or day fluctuates frequently, hybrid paddy may suffer cold injuries and bacterial leaf blight (BLB) which cause drastic drop in yield, said an official at the Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE) in Kishoreganj.

He said in 2006-07 over 2,000 hectares of hybrid paddy fields in haor areas were damaged in only two weeks due to insufficient sunlight during the day and heavy fog at night.

Cultivation of the varieties imported from China, Philippines or India requires excessive use of pesticide, irrigation and fertiliser, the agriculturists said.

Chief Scientific Officer Mainul Ahsan at Soil Resource Development Institute (SRDI) said continuous application of pesticides form heavy metal intensity in soil and it increases toxicity of soil.

Soil toxicity reduces the population of microbes and slows nutrition process of plants and ultimately decreases nutrients, he said, adding that shortage of nutrients finally results in production fall.

Heavy metal toxicity also enters the food chain and is likely to cause serious health hazards, Ahsan said.

"Our agriculture is going in the wrong

direction ignoring the adverse impact of pesticides and using arsenic-contaminated underground water for irrigation. Thus, our cultivable land is becoming infertile," said Prof Imamul Huq.

As the population of microbes does not increase due to application of more chemical fertilisers and pesticides, soil loses water-storing capacity resulting in drought-like situation in many parts of the country, he said.

Khairul Bashar, chief scientific officer at Genetic Resources and Seed Division (GRSD) of BRRI said, "Most of our indigenous rice varieties contain 10 percent protein while hybrid rice contains only seven percent protein."

The government should emphasise research to develop hybrid varieties from indigenous varieties, which will not only suit the local climate but also address the nutrition problem of the poor who mainly eat rice, he said.

A scientist at SRDI said, "The yield of our high-yielding varieties, BR-29 or BR-11, is almost the same as those imported from China. So, why are we rushing to import Chinese hybrid?"

"We should increase our yield but at the same time we cannot be dependent on foreign varieties. Such dependency may bring dangers to our agriculture," said the scientist, preferring anonymity.

Agriculture Ministry Joint Secretary Anwar Faruque said, "The difference of the amount of chemical fertilisers or pesticides used in local and foreign hybrid paddy is very negligible, so it will not have any adverse impact on soil fertility."

The government has directed companies concerned with seed import and distribution to produce hybrid seeds locally in five years. Besides, BADC started producing hybrid seeds and is expected to produce 300 to 400 tonnes next year, he said.



Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed presides over a meeting of the Council of Advisers at his office in the city yesterday. (Story on Page 1)

PROJECT STAFFS

None will be terminated

Hasina assures

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Representatives of the Staff Welfare Association of Bangladesh Government Development Projects met Sheikh Hasina on Friday to remove the uncertainty of their jobs.

They told her about their sufferings during the period of the previous government for its discriminatory policies.

The previous government had imposed bar on the transfer of the staffs from the development sector to revenue sector through issuing five different gazettes, and for this reason the staffs of the development sectors are not getting their salaries for a long time, they said.

Hasina assured them that no project staffs will be terminated and her government will take necessary steps in this regard.

MIGRANT WORKERS

Bangladesh can hardly ensure rights

Sultana Kamal tells consultation

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Human rights activist advocate Sultana Kamal yesterday said the major failure of Bangladesh is that it cannot protect rights of migrant workers despite their immense contribution to the country's economy.

"We talk about democracy and human rights, but neither can arrange employments for youths nor can we protect them while they are employed abroad," she said this at a consultation at the National Press Club in the city.

IMA Research Foundation, a migrant workers' organisation, organised the programme on the arbitration process of Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) and media intervention in ensuring migrants' rights to compensation.

Returnee workers and parents of migrants at different countries, especially Malaysia, gave accounts of various forms of cheating by agents, brokers, employers and lack of attention of Bangladesh missions towards them.

Speaking as the chief guest, Sultana Kamal, also former adviser to a caretaker government, said, "The stories of cheating and tortures we frequently hear about our

migrants abroad are no less than the horror cinema stories."

"I am very frustrated at it... It is a humanitarian issue," she said, lamenting that there is no effective arrangement for the protection of migrant workers.

Sultana Kamal, also executive director of Ain O Salish Kendra, further said the agencies and corrupt officials involved in the process of immigration protection so far got impunity.

The Anti-Corruption Commission is conducting its anti-graft drives in many sectors, but no efforts are apparent to curb corruption in overseas employment sector, she added.

She suggested empowering migrant workers, especially those who are cheated, so that they can realise the compensation from the recruiting agencies or brokers.

Harun Al Rashid, founding member of the foundation, said the government does not truly recognise the huge problems that Bangladeshi workers are facing in Malaysia.

"The brokers dominate in the Bangladesh High Commission in Malaysia," said Harun, who also works for the migrant workers with a Malaysian NGO Tenaganita.

Presenting his keynote paper, Radian Rahave, IMA

volunteer, said in the arbitration process at BMET most decisions go against the cheated workers.

According to a provision of Immigration Ordinance 1982, workers cannot file any case against the decision of BMET and this power actually creates scopes for some BMET officials to resort to corruption.

In many cases, BMET takes so long time that workers are subjected to serious harassments, while in some cases the arbitration process is stopped midway.

"Recruiting agencies also have a very strong influence on BMET," he added.

Asked about such irregularities, BMET Director General Abdul Malek said there are surely some lapses, but there are also problems in the arbitration process, as workers cannot always present their right evidences.

"If we don't find accurate evidence, we cannot give accurate judgments," he said, adding that the workers going abroad do not make public the fraudulent practices unless they are in trouble.

Anisur Rahman of the research body and Mojibul Haque of Brac also spoke at the consultation chaired by Dr Mizanur Rahman, a research fellow at National University of Singapore.



Bangladesh Chhatra League takes out a procession on the occasion of its 61st founding anniversary yesterday, causing gridlock in the city. The picture was taken from in front of the Institute of Engineers, Bangladesh.

BCL vows to establish violence-free campus

DU CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), student wing of Awami League, celebrated its 61st founding anniversary yesterday with a vow to establish violence-free campuses in all education institutions across the country.

The main programme of the day began on the Curzon Hall premises at Dhaka University by cutting a colourful cake where top student leaders and activists were present.

BCL President Mahmud Hasan Ripon said the organisation, formerly East Pakistan Student League, was formed on this day in 1948 under the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the then student leader and a student of DULaw department.

Later, BCL leaders and activists, led by Ripon and General Secretary Mahfujul Haider Chowdhury Rotan, placed a wreath at the portrait of Bangabandhu at Dhanmondi in the city.

They took out a colourful procession on the campus that paraded through different campus roads and ended after holding a rally at the foot of Aparajeyo Bangla where a good number of former BCL leaders, many of them are now elected lawmakers, participated in the programme.

Addressing the rally, ex-BCL leaders hoped that the present leaders and activists of BCL would retain its golden history and would work together to win the heart of thousands of young minds by their acceptable organisational activities.

They also called on the BCL men to ensure violence-free campuses in all educational institutions across the country.

Former BCL leaders including Abdur Rahman MP, Jahangir Kabir Nanak MP, Obaidul Kader, Sultan Mahmud Mansur, Naimuddin Hasan Chowdhury, Bahul Majnun Chunnun, Mostafa Jalal Mohiuddin, AKM Jahangir Hossain, Ajoykar Khokan, Liakat Shikder and Nazrul Islam Babu MP took part in the rally.

In the evening, top BCL leaders greeted Awami League President Sheikh Hasina with bouquets at her Sudha Sadan residence.

On the other hand, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal-backed Chhatra League also celebrated the day with holding programme on the campus.

JSD-Chhatra League leaders at a rally called on the next government to execute the trial of war criminals immediately.

Canada greets Bangladesh on successful nat'l polls

UNB, Dhaka

Canada has congratulated the people of Bangladesh on holding a successful parliamentary election.

Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon and International Cooperation Minister Beverley J Oda issued a statement yesterday congratulating the people of Bangladesh, said a press release.

"We offer our best wishes to the people of Bangladesh, who in this election exercised the fundamental democratic right to choose who will govern their country and represent them on the world stage," Minister Cannon said.

International Cooperation Minister Oda said, "Canada will continue to assist the government of Bangladesh in its efforts to build democratic and effective governing institutions."

"Governance, as well as health and education will remain key areas of focus for our development assistance in delivering tangible results in Bangladesh," he added.

No legal bar to Hasina assuming PM office

Say SC lawyers

UNB, Dhaka

Dismissing TIB Chairman Prof Muzaffer Ahmad's contentions, some leading lawyers of the Supreme Court yesterday said there is no legal bar to Sheikh Hasina assuming the office of prime minister riding on an outstanding popular mandate.

The lawyers, including Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA) President barrister Shafique Ahmed, Secretary Nurul Islam Suzan and former SCBA president Mahbub Alam, said criminal cases against Hasina are pending with the court. She has not been convicted in any case by any court of law.

"In any civilised nation and in accordance with the International Human Rights Declaration, an accused in a criminal case is presumed to be innocent until the allegation against the accused is proved by a court," they pleaded to rule out the views of the chief of the local chapter of the international watchdog against corruption.

The lawyers said the notion of 'presumption of innocence' is applicable in the case of Sheikh Hasina who has emerged as an "uncrowned

leader" through the December 29 parliament elections.

This is also legally applicable for those who were released on bail and would be inducted into Hasina's cabinet.

The lawyers said there is no difference between the release on parole or bail in the context wherein Prof Muzaffer made

PDB realises Tk 12cr outstanding bill

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

In an intensified drive against the bill-defaulters, Power Development Board (PDB) realised outstanding electricity bills of Tk 12.64 crore from the southern distribution zone of Chittagong, Cox's Bazar and three hill districts.

The drive continued from January 1 to December 31, 2008, disconnected power supply lines of 29,740 consumers for defaulting bills amounting around Tk 46 crore.

It also restored connections of 10,348 consumers after recovery of the outstanding bills during the period.

the contentious remarks.

On December 31, Prof Muzaffer at a seminar said Sheikh Hasina, now on parole, should not take oath as prime minister until the pending cases against her are disposed of.

He also stated that Hasina should not distribute ministerial portfolios to those who were convicted or awarded jail terms or now free on bail from jail following the pre-election turnaround from a massive clean-up drive conducted by the interim regime after the 1/11 changeover.

With all respect to Prof Muzaffer, the lawyers said there is no link between his remarks and legal jurisprudence and law. "Since Prof Muzaffer is not a legal expert, his remarks are tantamount to misinterpretation of law," they said.

Other signatories to the statement include Shamsuddin Chowdhury Manik, SM Rezaul Karim, Enayetullah Karim, Aminuddin, Mahbub Ali, AFM Mezbahuddin, Momtaz Uddin Mehedi, Nahid Sultana Juthi, Hassan Foiz Siddique, Nazamul Huq Nasim, Obaidur Rahman Shaheen, Dr Belal Hossain Joy and Zeal Al Malum.

Concern over post-polls violence

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) yesterday expressed deep concern over the incidents of attack on the leaders, workers and supporters of different political parties by their rivals at different parts of the country since December 29 national elections.

According to information collected by ASK in last few days, several people were killed in post-election violence in different places of the country.

Many leaders and workers

of different parties have been injured while the condition of many is said to be critical.

Besides, crimes like arson and setting fire to houses and shops also took place.

In a press release signed by its Executive Director Sultana Kamal, ASK said a review of the news published in different newspapers show that in most of the places the workers and supporters of the defeated parties are falling victims to the winning party or alliance and in some cases the workers of the victorious party are also

falling prey to vengeance of the defeated party.

ASK apprehended that the continuation of such incidents would worsen the law and order situation of the country.

It said the administration should take effective steps right now to stop recurrence of such incidents of violence.

ASK also hoped that the government would play strong role from a neutral position to stop post-election violence and ensure safety of life and property of all people.



Bangladesh Diploma Unemployed Nurses' Association stages a demonstration in front of the National Press Club in the city yesterday protesting illegal appointments. (Story on Page 2)

Written exam for deputy jailers on January 9

BSS, Dhaka

The written examinations of those who came out successful in the physical examinations for the post of 'deputy jailer' will be held at 10:30am on January 9 at Nabakumar Institute at Bakshi Bazar in the city.

The interview cards of the selected 800 candidates have already been sent to their respective addresses, said a press release.

Robbers loot five houses, injure 10

UNB, Keraniganj

Robbers looted cash and valuables worth over Tk 4.7 lakh from five houses in South Keraniganj here early yesterday leaving 10 people injured.

Police, quoting the local people, said robbers, numbering 12/14, stormed into the house of Lance Nayek Abul Hossain at Chankutia at about 2:00am.

They took away Tk 10,000 and two mobile sets from the house and also hacked Abul Hossain, his son Raju, daughter Farzana and wife Shahnaz Begum when they tried to resist them.

Later, the robbers swooped on the houses of Malek, Hedayet, Abul Bashar and Faruq at Purbapara and Nazirbag areas one after another and looted valuables worth over Tk 4.6 lakh.

During the robbery, they also injured Malek, his son Sohel and daughter Suraiya and Hedayet, Abul Bashar and Faruq with sharp weapons.

The injured were admitted to the local clinics.