

Rice to be cheaper

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fertiliser and diesel price, said experts.
The price of TSP (triple super phosphate) has been reduced to Tk 40 from Tk 75-80 a kg, MoP (muriate of potash) to Tk 35 from Tk 69-70 and DAP (diammonium phosphate) to Tk 45 from Tk 87-90, Agriculture Minister Matia Chowdhury said yesterday.
Last year, the average production cost of paddy was around Tk 11 a kg while the price of Urea was Tk 7, TSP Tk 40, MoP Tk 35 and DAP Tk 45 a kg.

During the previous Boro season, the diesel price was Tk 40 per litre, which now stands at Tk 44 a litre. So the costs of agricultural inputs have not become cheaper than the last year's despite the new government's positive move, experts said.

Economist Zaid Bakht, research director of Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), said the government move would have a positive impact on rice price.

"The production cost is going to come down," he said, adding that the production will also increase because of equal distribution of fertilisers.

The government has reduced the price of non-urea fertiliser, which was out of the reach of the farmers who had been using only urea fertiliser.

"Now it will help increase the production," he said.
Zaid Bakht also said the subsidy will not affect the budget which already has an allocation for the subsidy.

Dr Mahub Hossain, the executive director of Brac, said the production cost of rice would decrease eight to 10 percent following the government move.

The farmers had stopped buying non-urea fertilisers after their prices shot up sharply. Now the farmers will be able to buy those again.

"The government has to take prompt actions for the

farmers to reap the benefits as soon as possible," he said.
Mahub Hossain also said the government would be able to implement its decision comfortably as fertiliser prices have decreased on the international market.

"Many farmers will use compost fertiliser instead of non-urea fertiliser," he added.

Research Director of Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) Dr Uttam Deb said fertiliser prices on the international market doubled just after the last Boro season. But their prices started falling in November last year.

It is a proper government step for agricultural development, he said, adding, "If the government had not reduced the fertiliser prices, the production cost of rice would increase by over Tk 2.5 a kilogram," he added.

The experts said the government has to ensure supply of electricity in rural areas for running irrigation pumps in order to reduce the production cost further. Around 80 percent of total cultivable lands are under irrigation schemes.

A diesel-run pump now costs Tk 5,000 to irrigate an acre of land while an electricity-run one costs Tk 2,000.

At present, the government can meet one-fifth of the total electricity demand for irrigation.

EC warns

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He also expressed his dissatisfaction over the law and order situation ahead of the January 22 upazila parishad elections as post-poll violence still continues in the country.

Sakhawat also said they will not tolerate if anyone tries to prevent voters from going to the polling station.

The Election Commissioner also urged all, including the members of law enforcement agencies, to remain alert to avert any untoward incident.

He said the returning officer concerned would be directed to investigate the allegation of participation of Rajshahi City Corporation Mayor Khairuzzaman Liton in election campaign. If the allegation against him is proved, then he will be alerted as he holds the status of a state minister.

About the commission's preparation for holding election to 481 upazila parishads, Sakhawat said the EC started sending the election materials across the country from yesterday.

Talking about the electoral code of conduct, he called upon the people concerned to abide by the rules during the election campaigns. "Otherwise," he said, "Law enforcement agencies, including police, have been asked to take stern action against the violators of the electoral code of conduct."

"The judicial magistrates will start their work from January 16 in the field levels to monitor the situation," he said.

Bangladesh

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He said in Jorhat in the troubled north-eastern state of Assam from 22 February to 7 March.

He said a platoon from Bangladesh's army - five officers and 15 soldiers - would operate with a similar strength of Indian paramilitary forces in an area where Indian forces are involved in counter-insurgency operations against separatist forces.

"Through a small exercise, this is a step in the right direction," Mr Das said.

"This exercise was planned and conceived as a confidence-building measure between the two countries as both are threatened by terrorism."

Bangladesh's army chief Gen Moeen U Ahmed took the initiative to develop military-to-military ties with India when he visited Delhi and Calcutta early last year.

The ties were cemented with the visit of Indian army chief Gen Deepak Kapoor to Dhaka in August last year.

Fertiliser prices

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lower rate," said Agriculture Minister Matia Chowdhury at a press briefing at her office yesterday.

Accompanied by Industries Minister Dilip Barua, Matia announced that the subsidy for non-urea fertilisers has been increased to 55 percent from the previous 15 percent. This means total subsidy to bail out the existing stock of non-urea fertilisers might stand at over Tk 2,700 crore in fiscal year 2008-09.

During the beginning of the current fiscal year the then caretaker government allocated about Tk 4,300 crore in subsidy to fertiliser, electricity and others, up from the previous year's actual allocation of about Tk 4,000 crore, a senior official of the agriculture ministry said.

The Awami League-led grand alliance had pledged in its electoral manifesto to enhance subsidy to agricultural inputs to ensure food for all.

Referring to the decision in the cabinet meeting last Wednesday, Matia unveiled the move to cut the fertiliser prices after a meeting at the finance ministry.

Despite a gradual drop in the non-urea fertiliser prices on the global market since last August, the prices remained high on the local market, which discouraged farmers to use the inputs. This resulted in a huge amount of unsold non-urea fertilisers at the dealers' level.

Farmers mainly used urea during the last couple of months although the then caretaker government raised its price to Tk 12 a kg.

Matia said their government now gives a subsidy of Tk 30 for 1 kg of urea.

The demand for urea in January-March period, the peak season for Boro cultivation, has been forecast at over 12 lakh tonnes. The total demand for urea in the current fiscal year is projected at 28.50 lakh tonnes, officials said.
The demand for non-urea fertilisers for the January

March period has been projected at about 3 lakh tonnes against a yearly projected demand of about 11 lakh tonnes for the current fiscal, they said.

Presently about 4,900 dealers distribute fertilisers across the country.

The government said there are adequate stocks of fertilisers to meet the farmers' demands this Boro season.

"We have adequate stock of fertiliser for the current Boro season. I urge all stakeholders in fertiliser management to carry out their tasks in a transparent manner to help ensure smooth agricultural production," Dilip Barua said at a meeting with Bangladesh Fertiliser Association, the federating body of fertiliser importers and dealers, at his office yesterday evening.

Ship breaker fined for flouting court order

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court (HC) has fined a ship breaker Tk 1 lakh for continuing with the breaking of a Green Peace-listed hazardous ship MT Enterprise in violation of a court order.

A division bench of the HC ordered Joinal Abedin, owner of M/S Madina Enterprise and importer of the hazardous ship, to pay the fine to the deputy commissioner of Chittagong within two weeks, in default of which he has to spend a week in prison.

The court order came following a writ petition filed by Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (Bela) that challenged the import of the hazardous ship that contains extremely dangerous substances like Asbestos, said a Bela press release yesterday.
The court on November 30 last year issued an injunction against breaking of the ship.

Govt to seek

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Earlier on October 16 last year, the Supreme Judicial Commission recommended four senior most judges of the High Court - Justice Shah Abu Nayeem Mominur Rahman, Justice Md Abdul Quddus, Justice Md Abdul Aziz and Justice Bijan Kumar Das - for appointment to the Appellate Division.

Appointment of at least one judge is necessary to form a bench for disposal of the case. However, Justice Quddus retired from his service yesterday and was accorded farewell by the judges of the Supreme Court including Chief Justice MM Ruhul Amin.

The minister said none of the previous governments had ever taken an initiative to accomplish the trial of such an important case. The murderers were rather rewarded and justice was thwarted, he added.

"Independence architect Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and almost all members of his family were assassinated on August 15, 1975 by a group of military officers and trial of that heinous crime is finally at its last stage now. The Awami League government took the initiative to start the trial in 1996," he said.

On obstacles, if any, to administering the swearing-in of four-party lawmakers-elect by Speaker Jamiruddin Sircar, the minister said: "There is no legal bar for the Speaker until a new speaker is elected by parliament."

In reply to another question on a newspaper report that the government is thinking about impeaching President Iajuddin Ahmed, he said he doesn't know any such move by the government.

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Illegal blood

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Rab seized four bags of blood from their possessions and slapped a fine of Tk 2 lakh for each and in default of which they will have to serve three months in jail.

They were sent to jail as they failed to pay the amount of fine, Rab sources said.

Maj Saiful Islam Chowdhury told The Daily Star, Milon would collect blood for Tk 80 per bag from professional blood sellers especially from drug addicts without proper diagnostic tests and sold per bag at Tk 800.

He also said neither they had any legal documents essential to run such blood bank nor any proper arrangement to preserve the blood as they kept them in the refrigerators of the nearby departmental stores.

"We do not put any tags on the blood bags mentioning their blood groups," he added.

He also said that he had a secret deal with nearby clinics and hospitals including National Heart Foundation and a Shishu Hospital at Mirpur where he sells those bloods.

Milon in Rab custody said he would mainly collect blood from drug addicts without proper medical tests and had been selling those with the help of some middlemen for long two years.

He also said he had been penalised six months back on the same charge and shut down the business but he had recently started it afresh.

Shakib flays

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It was however brave-heart cricketer Mashrafe who set the tone after the home side had decided to bowl out the opponent batsmen in overcast condition.

Bangladesh got off to a flying start when Mashrafe removed Upl Tharanga and Kumar Sangakkara with gem of deliveries for ducks in his first two overs. Dashing Sanath Jayasuriya went to the rescue, but his 64-ball 54 was not good enough for his side to put up a challenging total on the board, thanks to a brilliant fast bowling display from debutant Rubel Hossain.

Rubel made his first international game a memorable one as the right-arm paceman terrorised the Sri Lankan tail to pick up four for 33 runs while Mashrafe also captured the prize scalp of Jayasuriya to finish with 3-25.

The hosts were however in deep trouble as they yet again suffered all-too-familiar top-order collapse to see the scoreboard reading 11 for three, but captain Mohammad Ashraful brilliantly played the role of second fiddle by associating 92 runs for the fourth wicket with Shakib.

Shakib might have almost single-handedly challenged their mighty opponents, but Ashraful's 26 off 41 balls was really noteworthy.

AL grassroots

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party's district units to put up only one contestant for chairman post to ensure the party's victory in the local government polls slated for January 22, sources in the party said.

The party chief even asked them to take stern action against those who will ignore party decision.

Following the directives from Hasina, who took over as prime minister on January 6, leaders of district, upazila and union units of the party moved to act accordingly. They tried to select one contender for chairman through mutual understanding, or if necessary, through secret ballots, in many upazilas. But their efforts failed.

In some cases, AL central leaders also intervened to resolve the discords but did not succeed due to uncompromising stance of the contenders in the polls, party insiders said.

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, a senior AL leader seeking anonymity said many of the contestants did not agree to quit the electoral race hoping to 'get favour' in the polls as the party is in power.

Even in Pirganj upazila of Rangpur, from where Sheikh Hasina contested and own the recent parliamentary election, still has three AL candidates for the post of chairman.

The post is now very lucrative because it carries enough powers, and this why the contestants are not ready to quit the race, local leaders of the party noted.

Besides, now that the AL-led grand alliance is in power, candidates expect party backing to ensure his victory in the election, which is being held after more than 18 years.

Upazila parishad chairmen will carry out development activities using funds to be allocated to these local government bodies without consulting the local lawmakers.

Despite efforts by senior field level leaders of the AL to

resolve the feuds centring the polls, clashes took place between supporters of rival party candidates in at least six upazilas in the last couple of days.

The upazilas include Boda in Panchagarh, Bagatipara upazila in Natore, Barisal Sadar upazila, Batiaghata in Khulna, Gouripur in Mymensingh and Monirampur in Jessore.

The clashes left over 50 party leaders and activists injured and party offices ransacked.

In many upazilas, although rival contenders from the AL stepped out of the polls race following intervention from party high-ups, they are not working for candidates who are backed by the party.

And rival candidates in many other upazilas refused to comply with grassroots leaders' decision to have one candidate for chairman. These upazilas include Kaliganj and Sreepur in Gazipur, Srimongal in Moulvibazar, Terokhada, Dighalya, Dakop, Batiaghata, Rupsha, Paikgachha, Fatullah and Koyra in Khulna, Sadarpur, Bhanga, Nagarkanda, and Modhukhali in Faridpur and Sadar and Hatibandha upazilas in Lalmonirhat.

But in some districts like Chuadanga and Bogra, party leaders managed to place only one candidate for the polls race for upazila chairman.

"There is no problem in our district. Following the party chief's directives, we have picked a single candidate for the post in each upazila of the district," Chuadanga district AL General Secretary Abul Kalam Azad said when contacted over telephone.

Contacted yesterday, Mansur Ahmed, vice-president of Sakthira district unit of AL, said more than one candidates from the party are in the polls race in three upazilas out of seven in the district, ignoring the party decision.

Koko kickbacks

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Replying to questions following the US justice department's move to confiscate nearly \$3 million from bank accounts in Singapore, which are allegedly linked to a bribery scandal involving Koko, the US embassy spokesman said the US government is working closely with the Bangladesh government on the case.

DOJ filed a forfeiture action against the funds, held by multiple account holders, on January 8 in a US district court of the District of Columbia.

The accounts allegedly have the proceeds of a wide-ranging conspiracy to bribe public officials and their family members in Bangladesh, in connection with various public works projects.

The complaint relates primarily to alleged bribes paid to Koko, in connection with public works projects awarded by the Bangladesh government to Siemens AG, a German industrial conglomerate, and China Harbour Engineering Company.

When asked about the total amount of stolen money so far detected by FBI or DOJ in connection with the case filed, the spokesman said DOJ states that approximately \$3 million were traced by the US.

The US looks forward to working with the Bangladesh government to recover any additional amount that went through US financial institutions and are subject to the US jurisdiction, he said.

In reply to another question, he said DOJ and the US Securities and Exchange Commission on December 15, 2008 announced that Siemens

Permanent Pay

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The issue of forming a permanent pay commission is being considered as per Awami League's election pledge, Muhith said, adding problems arise as the pay scales are changed after every five or seven years.

In the budget for the current fiscal year, the immediate past caretaker government announced a pay scale and immediately formed a Pay Commission.

Mustafizur Rahman told journalists, "We are trying to present the pay commission's recommendations by March-April. We have several proposals like introducing risk-based salary scale and merit-based salary scale."

"Implementation of the pay commission's report means an increase in salary. However, alongside increasing the salary, we are thinking about the areas from where resources can be collected," he added.

Aktiengesellschaft (Siemens AG), and three of its subsidiaries pleaded guilty to violations of and charges related to the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA) of the US, which was extensively reported in newspapers.

Asked whether DOJ will file cases against the companies which bribed Koko and others, he said with regard to actions against other parties, the Department of Justice as a matter of policy does not comment on any investigation or action that might or might not be pending.

Meanwhile, the US team that was in Dhaka recently in connection with investigation of the \$3 million forfeiture case, departed yesterday, the spokesman said.

Envoy in KL

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on leave preparatory retirement (LPR) in June this year. Usually the government calls back ambassadors and high commissioners posted abroad one week to three months before LPR. But he has been called back early on "special ground", official sources said.

After the jail killing the service of Khairuzzaman was placed in the foreign ministry from Army and he was appointed in the Bangladesh embassy in Cairo where he served from 1976-1983.

He was arrested immediately after the Awami League government took over in June 1996 and sent on retirement on September 24 the same year. Prior to his arrest and retirement, he had been serving as acting ambassador in Manila.

Soon after the last BNP-led alliance government assumed power in October 2001, Khairuzzaman was released on bail and on May 4, 2003 he was reinstated as a Director General in the Foreign Ministry.

Khairuzzaman along with BNP leader late KM Obaidur Rahman, Shah Moazzem Hossain and Nurul Islam Manjur were acquitted of the jail killing charge by a trial court in 2004.

After the acquittal, Khairuzzaman was promoted to the post of additional secretary. He was then appointed as ambassador to Myanmar and served there from September 2005 to August 2007.

Then again he was promoted to the position of a fully-fledged Secretary in August 2007 and appointed as High Commissioner to Malaysia with rank and status of first class ambassador.

Convicted Omar given bail

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court (HC) yesterday granted three months' bail to former state minister for law Barrister Shahjahan Omar in connection with a corruption case filed by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC).

On May 14 last year, a special court sentenced him to 13 years' imprisonment for amassing wealth illegally and concealing information in his wealth statement submitted to the ACC.

After hearing of a quashing petition filed by Shahjahan, an HC bench of Justice Mozammel Hossain and Justice Afzal Hossain Ahmed stayed proceedings against him for three months.

It also issued a rule upon the government to explain within four weeks why the proceedings against him should not be quashed.

Shahjahan's counsel Barrister Shamsuddin Chowdhury Manik told The Daily Star that his client, who received gallantry award Bir Uttam for his contributions to the 1971 Liberation War, was abroad for medical treatment.

Shahjahan appeared before the court for bail after coming back to the country, he said.

The HC granted him bail on the ground that the trial proceedings of the case were not done with due process of law, he added.

Shahjahan had been on the run since the military backed caretaker government took over on January 11, 2007.

NBR asks

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The NBR requested the CAAB to cancel all Best Air flights until the payment of the tax arrears.

The NBR official mentioned that the Best Air authorities however sent the list of the passengers who traveled on their flights.

Best Air now operates flights to Singapore and Malaysia. Their Dubai, Bangkok, Colombo and Male routes are suspended.

Best Air obtained licence in 2006 from CAAB to operate passenger service in the international and domestic sectors.

The NBR also has due travel taxes from Biman Bangladesh Airlines Limited and GMG Airlines.

Biman in November paid Tk 15 crore in travel tax while GMG paid Tk 5.5 million. These two airlines also have unpaid travel taxes.

"But they are paying travel taxes by instalment, whereas Best Air did not pay anything," the NBR official said about the tax dodging.

The revenue board got Tk 210.97 crore as travel tax from different airlines that operate flights in Bangladesh in the first six months of this fiscal. The amount was Tk 229.48 crore during the same period of the previous fiscal year.

The amount of travel tax increased by Tk 16 crore in the month of November compared to the same month of the last fiscal, while the amount in December increased by Tk 5 crore over the previous fiscal's same month.

Global meltdown

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approached them in recent months with payment and employment issues.

Wham cited a case of 30 Bangladeshis, who were due to leave this week after their employers told them there was no work for them. They received their salaries only after the Ministry of Manpower's intervention.

Expatriates' Welfare Secretary Abdul Matin Chowdhury said some NGOs in Singapore extended assistance to a good number of Bangladeshis who want to stay there.

The Bangladesh mission in Singapore is also trying to arrange alternative jobs for them, but so far nothing could be done, he added.

"We are thinking of negotiating with the higher authorities in the Singapore about the issue," Chowdhury said.

He went on to say that the government has already instructed the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training not to issue emigration clearances to the jobseekers going to Singapore without contacting the Bangladesh embassy.

Meanwhile, Jolovan Wham said foreign workers in Singapore are given little real protection.

Israel intensifies

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The Islamist movement Hamas has reacted favourably to an Egyptian plan aimed at reaching a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, an official source was quoted as saying yesterday by state news agency MENA.

"Hamas has reacted favourably to Egyptian efforts to end Palestinian bloodshed during discussions (in Cairo) over the last three days," the official was quoted as saying.

Meanwhile, three rockets were fired from southern Lebanon towards the northern Israeli city of Kiryat Shmona.

The rockets fired from Lebanon landed on open ground near the city. There are no reports of injuries or damage.

Lebanese security officials say the Israeli army fired eight shells into southern Lebanon in retaliation, the Associated Press news agency reported.

Four rockets were fired on northern Israel from Lebanon last week, prompting fears of a widening of the conflict.

As attempts to end the crisis by diplomatic means continue, Israel pressed ahead with its military offensive overnight, hitting 60 targets, including 35 weapons-smuggling tunnels on the border with Egypt and a cemetery in Gaza City.

However, analysts say Israel may be holding back from all-out urban warfare in Gaza City.

Intense street fighting could cause heavy casualties on both sides, they say, which would be politically risky less than a month before Israel holds elections.

Speaking at a press conference in Cairo after meeting Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon repeated his call for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. He also said he would not visit Gaza until after a ceasefire had been implemented.

Israel had planned to send its chief negotiator, Amos Gilad, to Cairo to meet with Ban, but the trip was cancelled.

Meanwhile, the Israeli media have reported divisions within the government. Defence Minister Ehud Barak is said to favour a week-long ceasefire in Gaza to allow for the delivery of much-needed supplies and to give politicians the breathing space to hammer out a long-term truce.

But Prime Minister Ehud Olmert says he wants to press on with the military campaign, for however long it takes.

After Cairo, Ban will visit Israel and the West Bank as well as other regional powers.

He has said he will also be encouraging initiatives to open border crossings with Gaza, which is subject to an Israeli blockade, and provide humanitarian aid.

The UN chief however is not scheduled to meet representatives of Hamas, but he has already held talks with Saudi King Abdullah amid reports Cairo is putting increasing pressure on Hamas leaders to accept a truce proposal.

A spokesman for Hamas, which controls Gaza, said any ceasefire agreement would have to entail a halt to Israeli attacks, a complete withdrawal of Israeli forces and the opening of border crossings to end the blockade of Gaza.

Humanitarian concerns have increased amid the fighting, although some aid is getting through to Gaza during daily three-hour lulls Israel has allowed to let in supplies.

On Tuesday, a senior UN aid official appealed to the international community to provide protection for civilians in Gaza, calling it a "test of our humanity".

Halt attacks on Gaza

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violation of international humanitarian law and international human rights law by the Israeli occupation forces," said a foreign ministry statement yesterday.

"It is disconcerting to see that even the humanitarian workers are being killed by the Israeli attackers," the release said, adding that entry of the ICRC, an international humanitarian organisation, has also been blocked.

Dhaka also noted that the special rapporteur for the Palestinian territories has been denied entry into the occupied territories. Foreign journalists are also being deterred to report from the conflict zone.

"We deplore these actions of the Israeli government which are blatant violations of international law," said the protest note.

Bangladesh calls for immediate halt of the Israeli attacks that have so far caused deaths of hundreds of Palestinian civilians, many of whom are women and children, and destroyed all infrastructures in the occupied territory.

"Israel must comply with the United Nations Security Council resolution 1860 adopted on the 8th of January that called for an 'immediate, durable and fully respected ceasefire, leading to full withdrawal of Israeli forces from