

Swine flu, economic downturn overshadow Muslim holiday

AFP, Riyadh

Muslims entered the fasting and feasting month of Ramadan on Saturday with swine flu and the economic downturn adding to security fears in several Islamic countries in dampening the mood.

The threat from the A(H1N1) virus prompted a string of governments to place restrictions on citizens making the pilgrimage to the holy places in Saudi Arabia traditionally made by many Muslims during Ramadan, while financial worries forced many families to cut back on their holiday spending.

In the Saudi cities of Mecca and Medina, which normally do a brisk trade from pilgrims during Ramadan, businesses were braced for their worst holy month.

The price for package tours for Saudis from Riyadh to Mecca has been slashed by 25 percent, the English language Saudi Gazette reported.

In neighbouring Medina, officials said they expected business to be down by 70 percent.

Saudi newspapers showed pictures of pilgrims wearing face masks to ward off the swine flu, which has killed 16 people and infected more than 2,000 in the kingdom.

Shiite Iran banned its citizens from making the pilgrimage and cancelled all flights to the kingdom for the duration of Ramadan.

A string of religious authorities across the Arab world also urged the faithful to stay at home this year.

In the Saudi capital shoppers jammed supermarkets until late into the night on Friday to stock up their larders for the extensive iftar meals served to family and friends after the daytime fasts.

Satellite TV networks launched special programming of serial dramas, sitcoms, talk shows and films in a bid to grab market share in the peak viewing period of the year.

Arab News columnist Tariq al-Maeena bemoaned the commercialism that has overshadowed Ramadan's spiritual roots.

"It is a month of introspection, a month of mercy, patience and self-discipline," he wrote.

"Instead, what has been evident are the heavily advertised television serials ... bound to take the viewers away from their activities of faith and keep them up all night."

In other parts of the Arab world without the kingdom's massive oil wealth, financial fears meant families approached the holy month far more cautiously.

In Algeria, where past Ramadans have been marred by flurries of attacks by Islamist militants, families said they were now more worried about their pockets. Some 1.2 million disadvantaged families will get state help this year to cope with the costs of the holiday.

"Security is far from being our main concern," said Abdellatif, sitting with his wife at a seafood cafe in the resort town of Boumerdes, east of the capital Algiers, which is still regarded by the army as a high-risk zone.

"I'm mostly concerned about making it to the end of the month," he said.

In other parts of the world though, security remained a pressing issue. In Muslim-

majority southern Thailand -- scene of a five-year-old insurgency that has killed 3,700 people, rebels killed three security volunteers and three civilians on the opening day of the fast.

Iraq too remained on tenterhooks after two deadly bombings in the heart of Baghdad on Wednesday ratcheted up tensions between the Shiite majority which leads the government and the disenchanted Sunni Arab former elite.

In a break with the communal rivalries of previous years since the US-led invasion of 2003, Sunnis and Shiites marked the start of the Ramadan fast on the same day this year.

But dozens demonstrated against government plans to remove concrete blast walls from Baghdad's oldest thoroughfare, Al-Rasheed Street.

"If they open up the road, we will be the first victims of explosions during Ramadan," said Adel Abu Mohammed, a 30-year-old street vendor.

In a new bid to improve US relations with the Islamic world marred by the war in Iraq, President Barack Obama sent a Ramadan message to Muslims promising "concrete actions" and a "new beginning."

"I know this to be a festive time," he added, alluding to his father's Muslim background.

In the United Arab Emirates capital of Abu Dhabi, police announced they would be giving out 35,000 free iftar meals to commuters in a bid to curb road accidents caused by drivers speeding to get home in time for the breaking of the fast, the Al-Khaleej newspaper reported.

Essentials' prices

FROM PAGE 1

sugar remain stable.

But the prices of imported onion saw fresh rise of Tk 2 yesterday selling at Tk 24-26 a kg. It also recorded a rise of Tk 2 day before yesterday.

With another jump in price of Tk 5 on an average, brinjal was sold at Tk 35-70 a kg at different markets of the capital.

The price of chickpea increased by Tk 2 in the retail markets while the price of *Khesari Dal* saw a rise of Tk 2.

Chickpea was sold at Tk 48-60 a kg and *Khesari Dal* at Tk 50-55 kg.

The prices of cucumber increased by Tk 2-3 a kg yesterday from Tk 25-38 day before.

Traders at the Karwan Bazar vegetable wholesale market said the prices of green chili and vegetable dropped due to huge supply. Price of green chili was decreased by Tk 30 per kg on average.

Wholesalers blamed the retailers for the price hike saying the trend of increasing price was due to huge demand ahead of the Ramadan.

Quazi Faruque, General Secretary of Consumers Association of Bangladesh, said lack of close monitoring is a cause for price hike.

He also said there is a tendency of making excessive profit during the Ramadan as there is no system to punish unscrupulous traders.

Urging the consumers not to buy excessively, the minister said, "Our consumers rush with a trend of panic buying" before the Ramadan helps triggering the price hike. I want to assure them there is adequate supply of items."

Security is far from being our main concern," said Abdellatif, sitting with his wife at a seafood cafe in the resort town of Boumerdes, east of the capital Algiers, which is still regarded by the army as a high-risk zone.

"I'm mostly concerned about making it to the end of the month," he said.

In other parts of the world though, security remained a pressing issue. In Muslim-

prompted me to make these nests for them," stated the bird lover.

At the village, The Daily Star correspondent saw thousands of birds were returning from different directions as the sun was getting down.

Hashem motivates other residents to be habituated with the 'nest culture' so as to make the place habitat for birds of different species.

"Hashem Ali used to visit every resident and inform them about the local birds including sparrows to leave a small place for the birds. Inspired by his initiative, we build these nests. We realised that these days we barely get to notice enough birds around us," said Rezaur Rahman who has made artificial nests for sparrows.

"I got the inspiration from Hashem Ali who came to me and informed me about the safety of these birds. Now the farmers of the village do not use insecticides on their croplands as it is hazardous to them," said another villager.

Bird lovers of the village say such initiative should be taken in every village in the country to ensure a safe place for the local birds.

He says an incident of bird hunting inspired him to do something for these little creatures. "I was very much touched. This accident



A freight train derails near Gazipur Railway Junction snapping rail communications between Dhaka and the western regions of the country and Mymensingh. Rail communication was restored at 8:55pm. Story on page 5.

PHOTO: STAR

Clean Street starts today

FROM PAGE 16

The committee headed by the additional secretary of the communications ministry was formed at a meeting held at the communications ministry on Thursday.

Earlier on August 12, the DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.

Police already have started action against 20-year-old DMP commissioner called upon the authorities of city's educational institutions to close their institutions after the 15th of Ramadan as a measure to reduce the traffic congestion in the capital.