

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 in years.

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 fast ends.

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-Maena 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 Abdelalik, 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 disenfranchised 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 Atreet.

"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 chickenpaw increased by Tk 2 in the retail markets while the price of Khesari Dal saw a rise of Tk 2.

Chickenpaw was sold at Tk 48-60 a kg and Khesari Dal at Tk 50-55 a 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 chilli and vegetable dropped due to huge supply. Price of green chilli was decreased by Tk 30 per kg on an 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."

Chirping village

FROM PAGE 16

bats, cuckoos and crows and creatures like butterflies, grasshoppers and bees used to rest on the branches, twigs and leaves.

"Initially birds did not like to sit or breed here, but now they have accepted these places as their nests. Not only this, many artificial nests have also been made in the houses of the villagers," said Hashem Ali.

According to villagers, the congregation and chirping of birds in evenings make the environment and the surrounding areas fascinating, which extends into the night. At dawn, the birds leave the trees and again come back in dusk.

Hashem said it is impossible to count their numbers but they just watch their varieties increasing every year.

Apprehending that many sparrows and other birds may one day meet the similar fate of vultures whose number has drastically decreased here, Hashem Ali felt to do something for the little birds.

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

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 emerald birds around us," said Rezaul 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.



A freight train derailed 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 buses plying city roads as a large number of those vehicles are on roads creating severe traffic jams despite government ban.

Around 50,000 buses and minibuses are plying the streets of the capital. Of them, 50 percent of these vehicles are 15 to 20 years old. Besides, 1,725 of the total number of

buses have not appeared for fitness certificate for a long time.

City-dwellers have already been experiencing severe traffic jams and it will be worsening during the month of Ramadan.

Increase in the number of vehicles everyday, lack of adequate manpower, faulty automatic signal and tendency towards disobeying traffic rules are the main causes of traffic jams.

Besides, inadequate roads, absence of direct east-west roads through the city, lack of mass transport are also counted as factors for the traffic problems, and as many as 20 railway crossings in different parts of the city are adding to the traffic gridlock.

Talking to UNB, Joint Commissioner (Traffic) Md Shafiqul Rahman said, "DMP already started drives against

backdated buses from August 7. Around 1,500 buses already have been detained since the drive started."

Referring to traffic jams during Ramadan, he hoped that city-dwellers would get some relief if drivers fully obey traffic rules and old buses/minibuses as well as duplicate or illegal vehicles are kept away from the city roads.

According to a survey, around 200 motorised vehicles are added to the honking fleets on the already-congested roads in the capital everyday.

Presently, 115,000 registered private cars, 10,000 taxicabs and 50,000 buses and minibuses are plying different routes in the capital, according to Bangladesh Road Transport Authority.

Of them, 218,000 new vehicles have been registered in the last two and a half years.

Saudi govt yet

FROM PAGE 16

welfare ministry said the number of returnees on "out pass" is a lot more than that of the previous years.

Even those who have job offers and are willing to work there are also being forced to return home after expiry of job contracts. The government, however, does not record the number of such returnees from the Kingdom.

Fakhrul Basher, a professional working in the Kingdom, told The Daily Star that many incompetent and semi-skilled workers went to that country spending Tk 3 lakh to Tk 4 lakh, but could not recover the money even after working three years.

As per rules if a worker completes the job contract with a company and wants to join another he can do it upon agreement between the previous and new employers.

"As the Saudi authorities do not allow them to transfer jobs, many of such workers are overstaying to recover their money," he said.

Bangladeshis overstaying there are passing through very bad times, Basher said, adding employers take advantage of the workers' illegal status and deprive them of due facilities, he said.

Even the professionals are facing huge problems for not getting iqamas.

Dr Mehedi Hasan went to Saudi Arabia. Now he got a new job but Saudi government does not allow him to join the job, said his relative Dr Manzur Morshed in Dhaka.

Engineer Rabiul Alam said he had been working in a project for 14 years in the Kingdom. After the project was over he wanted to join another job but he failed to do so though both the employers agreed on the matter.

"I had to come back home and then take a labour visa but I am a civil engineer," he told The Daily Star, adding: "Because of my labour visa, I cannot bring my family with me."

Another BDR

FROM PAGE 16

suffering from liver cirrhosis and cancer.

The press release however did not specify what type of cancer he had been suffering from.

Mujibur was admitted to Chittagong Medical College Hospital on July 1 and later taken to the BDR Hospital on July 15. He was shifted to BSMMU on August 4.

His body has been sent to his village home where he will be buried.

The BDR members lost their lives, from health complications including cardiac arrests since the February mutiny. Many also committed suicide.

He also said he found many workers facing serious problems because of Saudi government's restriction.

Bangladesh's labour councillor Harun Or Rashid said Saudi Arabia is not imposing the restrictions only on Bangladeshis but also on other nationals. "They are trying to replace all expatriates by Saudi people."

The workers in the government projects do not have any problem, he said.

Engineer Rabiul Alam, however, said, "It does not matter much as less than one percent of Bangladeshis workers in the government projects."

Outlaw killed

FROM PAGE 16

police, they started firing that triggered an hour-long gun battle between the outlaws and police.

But the outlaws fled the scene at one stage and police found Naharul's dead body on the spot.

Police also recovered one LG, 24 rounds of bullet and two swords from there.

Police said Naharul was one of the most wanted outlaws in the district. He was accused in at least 10 cases of extortion and robbery including six for murder filed with Mirpur and Daulatpur police station.

Ramadan

FROM PAGE 1

get close to Allah through restraint and austerity for the purification of the souls."

She urged all to avoid all kinds of wrongdoing and work for peace in the society.

BNP Chairperson and leader of the opposition Begum Khaleda Zia prayed for happiness, peace and progress of the country and the Muslim Ummah on the eve of the holy month.

Different social and political organisations also conveyed their greetings to the people of the country.

The government has announced new office timings for the holy month. BSS adds, all government, semi-government, autonomous and semi-autonomous offices will remain open from 9:30am to 4:00pm from Sunday to Thursday during the month.

Financial institutions and postal, telephone and railway departments, hospitals and state-owned industries will follow their own time table.

Meanwhile, at least 1,500 families in the Bhola district started fasting yesterday, one day ahead of the holy month of Ramadan, reports BSS.

They start fasting one day ahead of officially declared Ramadan and celebrate the Eid-ul-Fitr accordingly every year.

TCB

FROM PAGE 1

impact on the prices of basic commodities during the Ramadan.

The TCB began sales operation from its current stock of 3,56,136 litres edible oil and 1,000 tonnes sugar in its warehouses.

During a visit to a market yesterday, it was noticed that the commodities were sold at their previous high rate defying the TCB sales operation rules.

The trading corporation has fixed the retail edible oil price at Tk 76 per litre and sugar Tk 40 per kg. The dealers bought sugar at Tk 37 per kg and edible oil Tk 73 per litre from the TCB warehouse.

Now the TCB is distributing 1,000 litres of edible oil and 1,000 kgs of sugar to each dealer in the city from its warehouses in Dhaka.

But the demand of relatively low priced TCB items is much higher compared with the items selling in the open market, as noticed during a visit in the city.

"I have sold edible oil and sugar worth Tk 37,000 on the second day of sales operation and Tk 25,000 on the first day on August 20," said Lovely Sultana Mejbah, a TCB dealer in the city's Khilgaon area.

Lovely, owner of Lovely Enterprise, said the supply of edible oil is near to finish, as the demand for these items is high ahead of the Ramadan.

Talking to The Daily Star, Nilufar Rahman, a dealer of the TCB in Hazaribagh area, said the demand for edible oil is higher than that for sugar.

She said the price gap between the TCB sugar and open market sugar is very small. "As a result, the demand for sugar is comparatively low," she said.

When asked, a senior official of TCB warehouse said until yesterday 101 dealers lifted 1,000 litres of edible oil and 1,000 kilograms (kgs) of sugar each for selling during the Ramadan.

"We are delivering goods to dealers even on public holidays--Friday and Saturday," the TCB official said.

TCB officials said they would start countrywide sales operation of these commodities after the arrival of 25,000 tonnes of edible oil and 25,000 tonnes of sugar from Malaysia and Thailand, respectively.

9 of three families

FROM PAGE 1

The victims alleged that cadres of property developer Anandadhara Housing picked them up and forced them to sign on stamps as they refused to sell their land to the firm.

Nitai Das told The Daily Star that a gang of around 20 armed criminals repeatedly knocked at their doors on the ground and first floors of the building they live in saying they came to search the rooms for a criminal who took shelter in the building.

"As we did not open the doors they shouted at us and identified themselves as police and tried to break open the doors with iron rods," Nitai said.

"As we opened the door at one stage, the criminals entered the rooms and gagged us and started looting our belongings," he said, adding that the criminals then walked them to the workshop and confined them there.

Shambhu Das said he and his brother Mohabir and his cousin Nitai own the four kathas of land. The criminals tortured the three and their female family members and took their signatures on blank stamps, he added.

"Six months ago developer firm Anandadhara Housing gave us a proposal to sell the land to the firm or hand it over for developing. People from the firm made the same request several times as we refused," Shambhu said.

He said police reached Hrishikesh Lane half an hour after the criminals had taken the victims to the workshop at gunpoint.

Sutrapur Police Station OC Tofazzal said they reached the spot on information and arrested the four criminals at a nearby place. He said based on the information of the arrestees the law enforcers rescued the victims from the workshop where they were found lying on the floor, their hands tied with rope and mouths gagged with tape.

Tofazzal added that they suspect the land dispute is behind the incident.

Alamgir Khan, director of Anandadhara Housing, denied their involvement in the kidnapping. He said they offered the three families around six months ago to hand over the piece of land to them for developing but the owners of the land rejected the offer.

Two schools shut

FROM PAGE 1

Sunbeams, another leading English school in the city, was also closed down yesterday.

"Such a reaction is quite unnecessary," said Prof Mahmudur Rahman, director of the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR).

"Such steps will only lead to other schools following suit. We will take up the matter with the education ministry because we think the situation is nowhere near anything which calls for shutting down of schools."

He said that the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) also thinks that schools need not be shut down for fear of spread of swine flu.

Health Minister Prof AFM Ruhul Haque at a press briefing yesterday said, "The situation is not alarming now, but might worsen as it has been seen in neighbouring India where it spread widely."

World Health Organisation (WHO) in a statement on Friday said if someone with confirmed or suspected H1N1 infection shows symptoms as shortness of breath, chest pains and high fever lasting beyond three days, they should seek immediate medical advice.

The WHO also issued new guidelines for use of the drugs against the pandemic. According to the new guidelines, formed by consensus by a global group of experts, healthy patients with uncomplicated illness do not need to take any antivirals.

Some 102 patients have been infected with the virus since June 19. All have been treated with the antiviral drug Oseltamivir, government officials said. Most have already recovered while three still remain hospitalised. The condition of one of them is critical, Prof

Mahmudur Rahman said.

Government sources said appropriate measures have been taken to contain the spread of the virus. Isolation wards have been set up at different hospitals, the stock of the antiviral drugs has been strengthened and health professionals across the country have been trained for swine flu management.

Different pharmaceutical companies including Beximco, Popular, Square and the Essential Drug Company Limited are manufacturing the antiviral in the country, sources said.

Experts suggest that anyone suffering from fever, runny nose and coughs should stay indoors till the symptoms subside.

"But if they suffer from any respiratory illnesses with flu-like symptoms, they should immediately seek medical treatment," Brig Gen Khademul Hisan Iqbal, director of the Mitford Hospital, said.

He also said that as a precaution, all people across the country should maintain respiratory etiquettes and other basic hygiene standards as frequent washing of the hand with soap and water.

According to the World Health Organisation, about 182,166 laboratory confirmed cases of H1N1 have been reported till August 13 and more than 1,799 deaths have been reported worldwide.

DU observes

FROM PAGE 16

the day as black day was taken at an emergency meeting of the university authorities on Thursday.

No class will be held from 11:00am to 1:00pm.

The teachers and students will wear black badges and hold a discussion at Teacher-Student Centre (TSC) in the morning.

Dhaka not ready

FROM PAGE 16

Ambassador James Moriarty's request to the government of Bangladesh to recognise the Balkan state soon.

The ambassador made the call during a meeting with Foreign Minister Dipu Moni Thursday, as a tug-of-war between rival world powers over the breakup of the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia is yet to be over.

In reply to a question, Quayes said Bangladesh wants to maintain good relations with both the United States and Russia and does not want to see one play against another.

About trial of the war criminals, he said the government has made precise decision to hold the trial to heal the pains and hoped the world community would support it.

Asked about US, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan's positions on the issue, the foreign secretary said those who were in favour of war crimes in 1971 might obviously feel embarrased. About Pakistan, he said Islamabad "should not escape but accept the reality."

In this context, he mentioned the meeting between Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Pakistan Prime Minister Gilani in Egypt when the Pakistan prime minister expressed his desire to move forward.

About bringing back the killers of Bangabandhu from abroad, he said efforts are underway to bring the fugitives back to the country.

Mumbai info

FROM PAGE 16

Pakistani High Commissioner to India, Shahid Malik.

Although the details and nature of evidence was not divulged immediately by the concerned authorities, sources told ANI that this move was prompted by the release of JuD chief and LeT founder Hafiz Mohammad Saeed who could not be prosecuted for involvement in the Mumbai terror attacks in the absence of 'concrete evidence' against him.

The latest documents given to Pakistan reportedly provide critical evidence against Saeed. India has expressed dismay over Saeed's release, whom it sees as the mastermind of the Mumbai terror attacks.

Federal Bureau of investigation officials have also testified and submitted their report to a special court that is investigating the 26/11 attacks.

New Delhi has blamed

Pakistani "official agencies" for abetting the 60-hour assault by 10 militant gunmen on India's financial capital.

The lone surviving gunman has told a Mumbai court that he and the others who attacked a railway station, two hotels and a Jewish centre were Pakistani nationals and came to the Indian city undetected by sea.

India says they were members of the Pakistan-based militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba.

Pakistan has so far arrested five people suspected of involvement in the assault, including the alleged mastermind, Zakiduddin Lakhvi. His trial is expected to begin next week.

Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani pledged earlier this month to do everything in his power to bring those behind the attack to justice following a meeting with his Indian counterpart Manmohan Singh in Egypt.