

# Baburhat goes frenzy ahead of Eid

REFAYET ULLAH MIRDHA

As the Eid festival approaches, traders and shoppers were seen closing their deals at Baburhat, one of the largest wholesale clothing markets in the country.

The weekly roadside bazaar of more than 1,200 shops of local clothing items get packed with sellers, distributors, retailers and workers from across the country.

Traders crowd around Baburhat in Narsingdi, 45 kilometres north from Dhaka, during every Ramadan to purchase low-cost clothing items for zakat.

Zakat is the amount of money that every adult and financially able Muslim has to pay to support the poor or needy. It is one of the five basic requirements of Islam.

Affluent Muslims distribute different clothing items as zakat ahead of Eid-ul-Fitr.

Baburhat is not only famous for low-priced saris and lungis, but also for other items such as fabrics and salwar-kameez for women.

It is the peak selling season and it becomes tough to enter the main market from the Dhaka-Sylhet highway through the narrow lanes.

Workers are always there to load and unload clothes to serve businessmen of different parts of the country.

The market sits on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays when weavers from Tangail,

Shyampur, Sirajganj and Kushtia bring different clothing items to sell to shop-owners, who then deliver those to other traders across the country.

Wholesalers, locally known as paikar, from Barisal, Khulna, Kushtia, Jessore and the northern districts are the main buyers of the clothing items for zakat.

This year, the prices of saris and lungis are at least 15 percent lower than those last year, as yarn prices marked a fall in the face of declining cotton prices in the global market, said Noor-e-Alam Badal, managing director of Altex Print Sari.

This year, each sari for zakat is priced at Tk 250, while the best ones cost Tk 400 a piece, he said.

The number of customers increased in the last two weeks although some wholesalers completed purchase before the beginning of Ramadan.

"The volume of sales will rise from the next week," he said.

Mohammad Sabbir Hossain, a wholesaler at Kathgora Bazar in Savar, bought sari, lungi and other items worth Tk 3 lakh from a shop at Baburhat yesterday.

Hossain said Ramadan is the peak season as the demand for zakat clothes rises ahead of Eid.

"I purchase clothing items in bulk from Baburhat as the prices are relatively low here compared to other markets," he said. He also said there was no shortage of cloth-



AMRAN HOSSAIN

Customers crowd a shop at Baburhat in Narsingdi on Saturday. *Bottom left*, workers load up a vehicle with clothing items at the wholesale market.



ing items this year.

Waliur Rahman Mollah, a dyeing worker at a Shyampur-based factory, said shop-owners at Baburhat buy grey fabrics in bulk and send those to different dyeing factories for printing and colouring.

The dyeing factories return the printed saris and lungis to the shop-owners to store those in warehouses. For each sari, they charge Tk 130 for printing and Tk 400 for dyeing, he said.

"I will be able to sell products worth Tk 20 lakh in the three market days," said Shahajuddin, owner of Fatema Sandha Sari at Baburhat.

Satya Ranjan Das, a distributor of Amanat Shah Lungi, said the number of customers for lungis is higher this year. Each lungi is

priced between Tk 500 and Tk 700.

Traders transact crores of taka at Baburhat every week, Das said, but he did not disclose the figure of his weekly sales.

"The volume of sales is low this year, but I cannot tell you the reasons. Low prices of paddy in rural areas may be the cause of poor sales," said Delwar Hossain Khoka, owner of Disha Print Sari.

Political leaders used to buy a good number of zakat clothes every year, but this year the turnout of such customers is thin.

He said he has a good stock of lungis and saris. "But it will be difficult to sell all the goods ahead of Eid due to a poor demand this year."

"I will be able to sell 5,000 pieces of saris today. Sales were better last year. We had

made a hefty profit within the 15 days of Ramadan last year, but this year sales reduced by almost half," said Abdul Mazid, owner of Tata Print Sari.

He said the prices of saris range between Tk 300 and Tk 800 a piece at his shop.

"I will be able to sell clothing items worth Tk 30 lakh during three market days," said Shankar Kumar Das, owner of Pinky Cloth Store. This year, he sells 5,000 pieces of saris a day, which was 10,000 pieces last year ahead of Eid.

Jamsher Mollah, a distributor of ATM Lungi, said stockmarket crash is also one of the major reasons behind poor sales this year.

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## Myanmar energy tycoon lobbies for smart sanctions

AFP, Yangon

An energy magnate lauded as a rare "legitimate" tycoon in a crony-dominated Myanmar has quietly lobbied for an end to Western sanctions -- except those targeting cronies who flourished under military rule.

Michael Moe Myint is part of Myanmar's "One Percent" -- a jet-setting moneyed class comprising fewer than two dozen families who have long monopolised the business landscape of the poor but resource-rich nation.

Many of them are accused of harvesting wealth by currying favour with the military junta that ruled Myanmar with an iron grip until last year when a quasi-civilian government took charge under President Thein Sein.

Some of them are under individual sanctions for propping up the military, even as Western powers in recent weeks have eased restrictions on trade and investment to reward the new regime for a raft of sweeping reforms.

But Moe Myint, who enjoyed a meteoric rise from a pizza delivery boy in West Virginia -- where he pursued a degree in Physics -- to the head of a multi-million dollar oil and gas empire, has "repeatedly declined 'offers' to enter into a typical crony relationship", according to a 2009 US embassy cable.

Although known to be former dictator Ne Win's personal pilot while working for Myanmar Airways before launching his company, "he is a legitimate businessman... who earned his success through hard work and ingenuity rather than ties to the regime," said the diplomatic note released by whistleblower website WikiLeaks.

That is no small praise in one of Asia's most corrupt nations where success for a large enterprise was considered impossible without the patronage of former military rulers endowed with arbitrary powers to issue business



Michael Moe Myint

permits and licenses.

The kleptocratic system of governance enriched a small clique notorious for its entrenched vested interests and sometimes nefarious business practices -- while a third of the population subsists below the poverty line.

The US diplomatic cable, which praises Moe Myint for being the country's "largest single taxpayer", notes that "regime crony Tay Za, who allegedly earns more annually, pays far less in taxes, as his companies have a tax holiday".

Tay Za, of the Htoo Group, has a reputation as Myanmar's wealthiest and flashiest tycoon, with a penchant for Italian sports cars and travel by private jets.

He is accused by the United States of being an "arms dealer and financial henchman" of the military junta -- a charge he denies.

Zaw Zaw of the Max Myanmar conglomerate meanwhile is "one of several mid-level cronies that actively do the regime's bidding" to expand his commercial enterprises, which include a jade mine and a professional soccer team, according to another US diplomatic cable from 2007.

Afp, New Delhi

EVERY evening before Indian executive Sushmita Rao leaves her Delhi office, she phones her maid to switch on the air conditioner so her apartment is refreshingly cool when she reaches home.

"I work in an air-conditioned office and I suffocate if my place isn't cool," said Rao, one of hundreds of millions of Indians who went without electricity last week in the world's worst-ever blackout.

The monster grid failure was blamed on greedy states consuming more than their allotted power quotas as they sought to meet spikes in demand.

Part of the demand surge comes from Indians' adopting electricity-guzzling lifestyles which adds to the strain on the grid from industrial users and businesses in Asia's third-largest economy.

"As India's middle class broadens, there's a heavier burden on energy demand as people buy appliances for a better quality of life," said Will Pearson, global energy analyst at London-based Eurasia Group.

Experts warn blackouts like those that knocked out power to one half of India's 1.2 population last Monday and Tuesday, could be the way of the future unless the government fixes the creaking electricity sector.

"We're growing through a major societal transformation... we will need more and more power to fuel our industries, consumer goods, our malls, our offices," said Arvind Singhal, chairman of leading retail consultancy Technopak.

"Unless planners recognise this, we're going to see many more failures on the scale of the ones we saw."

There are 470 million people in what global consultancy PwC calls the "emerging middle class" -- those sandwiched between the lowest income group and the middle class.

Though they earn modest sums, collectively they have large purchasing power, PwC says.

The middle class numbers 160 million according to India's National Council for

# India's love of appliances boosts power consumption



AFP

**Air conditioning units line a side of a building in downtown New Delhi. No-one has blamed air-conditioners for this week's monster black-outs in India, but surging demand for them and other consumer appliances are placing a rising burden on the country's overstretched power system.**

Applied Economic Research -- bigger than the populations of Russia or Japan -- and is seen rising to 267 million by 2016.

Air conditioners, microwave ovens, toasters and washing machines are possessions that distinguish India's upwardly mobile and have become increasingly available and affordable since pro-market reforms of the 1990s.

Consumer attitudes in India to air conditioners have "witnessed a paradigm shift" in recent years from luxury product to domestic necessity, consultancy TechSci noted, forecasting the AC market will expand annually by 14 percent for the next five years.

Indian summers see the mercury rise above 50 degrees Centigrade (122 degrees Fahrenheit) in many areas, and these are followed by the sticky, humid monsoon season.

Ad manager Rao is one of an increasing number of Indians who work in air-conditioned offices, shop in air-conditioned malls and dine in air-conditioned restaurants.

Rao, who lives alone, says she has a washing

machine -- "it's easier for my maid" -- two TVs, air conditioners in every room, an entertainment system, laptop, hairdryer and a host of other electronic devices.

"I use a lot of electricity but it's my lifestyle -- I like to be comfortable," she says. She's not alone in her assortment of appliances.

"I have everything my parents didn't have," said Sheila Krishna, wife of a government bureaucrat. Experts say last week's blackouts served to focus minds on how India will meet the fast-growing needs of its citizens, industry and businesses.

The power failure was "a wake-up call", says Technopak's Singhal. "This country already has 900 million mobile phones -- it sounds like a small thing -- but these all need to be charged every day."

Power cuts are a daily occurrence in India which runs a peak-hour electricity shortfall of around 12 percent -- despite the fact that about a third of Indians have no connection to the grid.