

Potato farmers face hard time

Price slumps to Tk 2 a kg in Dinajpur

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

With the price hitting the rock bottom due to absence of traders and unfinished stock of last year, potato growers are having a tough time selling their produce in local markets.

According to farmers, the situation is apparently an aftermath of the political unrest that shook the country several months before and a few days after the national polls of January 5, 2014.

They said violence during the time discouraged traders from purchasing potatoes from distant districts, like Dinajpur and Joypurhat, which kept a huge stock of previous season unsold in cold storages.

"Believe it or not, last Saturday [January 25], I sold per kilogram of potatoes for Tk 2 at a market in Phulbari upzila of Dinajpur," said Md Abdul Mojib Mondol, a farmer from Rajarampur village of the upazila.

Mojib had spent Tk 16,000 to grow potatoes in his one-bigha land, from which he yielded 70 maunds of potatoes.

Fresh potatoes have started arriving in local markets since the end of December. As the month had witnessed massive violence across the county, local markets hardly saw any buyers, say farmers.

Golam Rabbani, a potato trader of Bahadur Bazar in Dinajpur town, said buyers from Dhaka, Chittagong and Sylhet used to swarm Dinajpur with the arrival of fresh potatoes. But this year they just vanished.

"The political unrest had mainly caused it. Besides, local demand for fresh potatoes has gone down with the increase in supply," said Rabbani, adding that similar situation was prevailing in other districts.

Farmer AK Azad of Raniganj area said he had stored 100 sacks (each 84 kg) of potatoes in a

local cold storage last season. The storage charged him Tk 350 for each sack.

"But it all went in vain, as exceedingly low price kept me from selling the potatoes," said Azad, adding that this season he grew 225 maunds of potatoes on his one-acre land and sold a portion of the produce at Tk 1.60 per kilogram.

During a visit to different areas of Dinajpur, farmers were seen not collecting potatoes from fields fearing further price drop. Totally at a loss, many are using previous season's potatoes as animal feed.

Officials of the Department of Agricultural

Extension (DAE) said this season farmers of Dinajpur grew potatoes on 42,500 hectares of land, exceeding the government target of using 35,474 hectares.

The district of Joypurhat is doing no better either.

Russell of Khetlal upazila of the district sold one maund of potato for only Tk 70. "I am harvesting no more because if I hire a day labourer for this he would charge me Tk 300 a day, more than the price of four maunds of potatoes," he said.

Anwarul Alam, deputy director of Dinajpur DAE, said the situation could improve if the government took initiatives to export potatoes.



Unable to bear high transport cost, farmers of Kishanbazar in Dinajpur leave their harvested potatoes in the field. Potatoes have been selling for as low as Tk 2 a kg there. PHOTO: STAR

New law to protect hills

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Association, the kilns are mainly traditional -- energy wasting and carbon emitting. Only 52 Hybrid Hoffman kilns, that use one third energy and raw materials required by traditional kilns, have been set up so far and it will soon replace another 150 traditional ones, says the association.

With the rapid growth of construction industry, demand for bricks is rising at 5.8 percent a year and over 8.66 billion bricks are produced every year, estimates UNDP's Green Brick Project.

Green Brick Project is providing brick makers with technical support in transforming the traditional industry to a more eco-friendly one. A Brick Centre will soon be set up under the project to support brick makers with necessary research data, technical training and awareness activities.

In a bid to make the kilns more eco-friendly, the new law has proposed using clay from ponds, wetlands, rivers and shoals as raw material.

It also bans establishing kilns inside or within one kilometre radius of residential and ecologically critical areas, forest and city corporation or upazila sadar areas. For flouting the law, one can face up to five years' jail or Tk 5 lakh fine or both.

Under the new law, the penalty for using agricultural or hill lands for manufacturing bricks will be a maximum two-year imprisonment or Tk 2 lakh fine or both, and for setting up kilns without licence, it will be one year jail term or Tk 1 lakh fine or both.

The law also prohibits the movement of heavy vehicles carrying bricks on upazila and union roads. Violation of this will result in Tk 1 lakh fine.

Under the previous Brick Kiln (Control) Act, 1989, one could be fined Tk 50,000 or jailed for one year for flouting laws. Only a few violators were fined but none was jailed.

Prohibition has also been slapped on setting up kilns within half-a-kilometre radius of a hill. However, for establishing a kiln in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, approval of the CHT Development Committee will be required, the law says.

As many brick kilns have been established in restricted areas with clearance from the Department of Forest (DoF), the new law has revoked the department's clearance authority.

The kilns, built upon the DoF's approval, must be relocated in two years, otherwise, their licences will be cancelled, says the law that includes bamboo stumps and date trees in the definition of wood and has banned their use in kilns.

The new law has empowered mobile courts to hold trials of the offenders on the spot under the penal code while deputy commissioners can outright shut down a kiln and suspend its licence if it is found to be polluting the environment.

However, Project Manager of Green Brick Project Khondker Neaz Rahman thinks merely enacting a law cannot ensure its success.

"A strong law is not enough to make a difference if there is no proper institutional support for its effective implementation. To this end, a Brick Centre, which will be funded by the UNDP, is at the planning stage," he said.

Echoing Neaz Rahman, Environment and Forest Minister Anwar Hossain Monju said, "It is easy to promulgate a law but we face difficulties when we try to enforce it. My ministry will try hard to enforce the new brick law in the interests of agriculture and environment."

MAKING TUNNEL

Bank Robbery mastermind learned it from TV show'

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The mastermind of the heist at the Kishoreganj main branch of Sonali Bank yesterday told interrogators that he got the idea of using a tunnel to rob a bank from a television show.

Yusuf Munshi alias Habib alias Sohel made the confession on the first day of his seven-day police remand.

Abdul Malek, officer-in-charge of Kishoreganj sadar police, told The Daily Star that Yusuf had told him that he knows different kinds of work, including how to cut iron grills and steal objects from secured places.

Being confident of his skills, he had opted to dig the underground passage to rob the bank, Yusuf told police.

Police said they had taken Yusuf and his detained brother Idris to the tunnel, their rented house in Kishoreganj and inside the robbed bank to figure out whether there were more people involved.

Rapid Action Battalion arrested Yusuf and Idris on Tuesday in the capital's Shyampur area with Tk 16.19 crore they had robbed from the bank.

Meanwhile, Kishoreganj police picked up for interrogation Nurul Huda, the owner of the Shaympur house, as he rented out the place to the brothers three days before their arrest.

the third phase.

The ruling AL has formed seven committees consisting of central leaders to assist the grassroots in picking single candidates for each post. The committees have started working to ensure victory for the party-backed candidates.

"On an average, four Awami League men are contesting the chairman post in each upazila. We are trying to project a single candidate. But it may not be possible everywhere," AL Presidium Member Kazi Zafarullah told The Daily Star yesterday.

Asked about his party's strategy, Lt Gen (ret'd) Mahbubur Rahman, a BNP standing committee member, said senior leaders would tour the country from tomorrow to boost the grassroots.

"During the visit, they will try to resolve the disputes, if any, to ensure better results in the upazila elections," he said.

Local government expert Prof Tofail Ahmed said upazila elections were nonpolitical in nature. But the way political parties are manoeuvring the elections is unethical, although not illegal.

The political parties' direct involvement in picking candidates will reduce the chances of non-partisan people getting elected, he noted.

Contacted on Thursday, Suchona claimed innocence and told The Daily Star that a section of the high commission officials, who were involved in the incident, was trying to make her the scapegoat.

She said she is new in the high commission and does not fully know the office activities.

Suchona, former leader of Eden College unit of pro-Awami League Chhatra League, joined the mission on October 23, 2013. Before that, she had been appointed as an assistant secretary at the foreign ministry's external affairs wing on a three-year contract on June 6, 2012.

Devotees gather

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Gazipur Chowrasta came to a halt for about an hour as a large number of devotees performed their Juma prayers on the streets. Many had to offer their prayers on the roof of buses due to shortage of space.

Meanwhile, five devotees died on the Ijtima venue since Thursday night, said Ismail Hossain, officer-in-charge of Tongi Police Station.

Of the deceased, Maulana Hedayet Ullah, 68, of Noakhali, died in a road accident while crossing Dhaka-Mymensingh highway near Tongi Bus Stand area yesterday morning, the OC said.

The four others -- Tojam Sarder, 80, of Magura, Abdul Latif, 75, of Comilla, Nur-e-Alam, 65, of Noakhali, and Abdur Rob Sheikh, 70 -- died of cardiac arrest and old age complications yesterday, said Mahbubur Rahman Chowdhury, resident medical officer of Tongi Upazila Health Complex.

Around 20,000 uniformed and plain-clothes policemen and members of Rab and intelligence agencies are in place on the Ijtima ground to ensure smooth holding of the congregation.

The first phase was held from January 24 to 26 where devotees from 32 districts of the country along with around 20,000 foreign

devotees of 103 countries took part.

The devotees from the rest of 33 districts with around 10,000 foreign devotees are joining the second phase which is scheduled to be concluded by Akheri Munajat or concluding prayer on Sunday.

The three-day congregation of the second phase includes delivering boyans (sermons) on the fundamental issues of Tabligh, prayer for the spiritual, exaltation and welfare of the Muslim Ummah, recitation from the holy Quran and Hadith and arranging dowry-free marriage.

Several mobile courts yesterday filed 11 cases and fined different restaurants adjoining the ground Tk 45,000 for selling adulterated food and unhygienic atmosphere at their restaurants, officer-in-charge of Tongi Police Station said.

The districts from where the devotees are participating in the second phase are Narayanganj, Dhaka, Cox's Bazar, Manikganj, Pirojpur, Patuakhali, Tangail, Jamalpur, Barisal, Netrakona, Comilla, Meherpur, Jhenidah, Mymensingh, Laxmipur, Brahmanbaria, Kurigram, Bogra, Panchagarh, Chapainawabganj, Nilphamari, Noakhali, Thakurgaon, Pabna, Naogaon, Munshiganj, Madaripur, Gopalganj, Satkhira, Magura, Khulna, Sunamganj and Moulvibazar.

3 robbers killed

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Jahangir died on the spot and Ripon succumbed to his injuries at Mithapukur Upazila Health Complex soon after the incident.

Critically injured Ahmed Ali died at Rangpur Medical College Hospital around 1:30pm.

Police arrested the rest of the gang members -- Rony Mian, 32 of Shariatpur, Azad Rahman, 35, of Gazipur and Forhad

Hossain, 36, of Madaripur district.

Abdur Razzak, superintendent of police (SP) in Rangpur, said, the arrested confessed that they were members of an inter-district robber gang.

Police recovered a foreign made pistol, three bullets, a number of sharp weapons, the private car and the looted money from the spot.

Two cases were lodged in this connection with Mithapukur Police Station, the SP added.

Punishment instead

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But Rizvi did not mention what Khaleda had specifically said about the issue.

Terming the verdict in the 10-truck arms haul case "farical", the BNP leaders said, it is a "deep conspiracy" to destroy the opposition party.

"The case was filed against those who had recovered the arms, and the judgment in the case is a farce and politically motivated," he told reporters while replying to queries on

the arms haul case verdict.

Lawyers of the party might say more about the issue later, he added.

It was Rizvi's first appearance before the media since his release from Dhaka Central Jail on Thursday.

He also thanked the media people for their role on November 30 when the detectives had arrested him from the party office, saying that if the journalists were not present there his life might have been at

Pak Jamaat condemns Nizami's death penalty

DUNYA NEWS ONLINE

Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) Pakistan chief Syed Munawar Hasan has strongly condemned a Bangladesh court decision awarding death sentences to the JI, Bangladesh chief and a former minister, Motiur Rahman Nizami, and thirteen others, and termed it as political vendetta.

He has appealed to the Pakistan government and all other Muslim rulers to play their role in preventing this tyranny and pressurise Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to stop political victimisation of her opponents.

In a press statement on Thursday, he said that the false case made out against the Bangladesh JI chief had fully exposed India



Munawar Hasan

which had a hand behind all political victimisation in Bangladesh.

He said that a false case had been made out against Nizami for smuggling arms and ammunition to secessionists in India.

He pointed out that Nizami was not named at the initial stage of the case and his name was included much later, as such the very foundation of the case was false.

Besides, he said, that no sane person could accuse a person like Nizami of arms smuggling.

Syed Munawar Hasan said that the people of Bangladesh had already rejected the court decision and there was deep concern among the people in Bangladesh over India's increasing hold on their coun-

Fire destroys 75 shanties in Khulna

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A fire in a slum of Sonadanga in Khulna city gutted 75 shanties last night.

The fire in the Musolman Basti originated from a short circuit inside a shanty around 8:15pm and the flames spread quickly, said Mohammad Masud Sarder, station officer of Boyra Fire Station in Khulna.

A number of people suffered minor injuries.

"The shanties shared walls and were made of materials like bamboo and corrugated iron sheet, which helped the fire

spread and difficult to extinguish," he said.

It took eight fire engines more than two hours to put out the blaze.

"The Musolman Basti mainly housed workers of the Khulna City Corporation and carpenters," the fireman said, adding that the fire began from a carpenter's house.

There was nobody inside the house when it began and therefore it went undetected until much later when it was spreading, he said.

The fire fighters were able to protect the Hindu-dominated Harijan slum, home to 200 families, which is next to Musolman Basti.

Ekushey in our collective soul

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There was, again, another February, this one in 1969, when the notorious Agartala Conspiracy Case, in which thirty-five Bangalees had been implicated by the Ayub Khan regime, was withdrawn unconditionally and all the accused were freed. In February 1969, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman became Bangabandhu.

February 1974 had a different story to relate. A few days after Pchela Falgun, Pakistan -- the state we helped create in 1947 and then, for perfectly good reasons, liberated ourselves from in December 1971 -- recognised the independent People's Republic of Bangladesh. Bangabandhu, Pakistan's prisoner for ten months between March 1971 and January 1972, was welcomed in Lahore as free Bangladesh's leader by men who had bitterly opposed his struggle.

But all these tales of February, straddling various points in historical time, were made possible by the patriotic zeal of the Bangalee

people in February 1952. In that month, in that year, it dawned on the Bangalee nation that its cultural tradition and its political moorings needed to be restored in the face of an onslaught on its language by political classes ignorant of the movement of history. In February 1952, the struggle in East Bengal was not against Urdu per se. It was against the sinister move by an increasingly entrenched ruling class in West Pakistan to impose Urdu as the language of the state on a people who formed a clear majority in Pakistan. The Bangla language and, by extension, the Bangalee heritage, needed to be safeguarded.

February 1952 marked a near quantum leap by Bangalees toward a redefinition of themselves. It was one of the earliest signs of a gradual evolution out of the narrow confines of communal politics and towards a reassertion of the secular Bangalee spirit. Ekushey sowed the seeds of Bangalee nationalism in Pakistan.

Bangladeshi blank passports missing in KL

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launched a nationwide crackdown on illegal immigrants since January 21. So far, 331 Bangladeshis have been detained.

Meanwhile, the Bangladesh High Commission in Kuala Lumpur on January 24 asked Suchona in a letter to return to Kuala Lumpur immediately and appear before the committee by January 27.

She is, however, still in Bangladesh citing medical reason.

The high commission wrote her: "... you are the custodian of the passports; your office room

is inside the vault room of the stock of passport at the chancery. Since Malaysian government is now enforcing a crackdown on the detention and deportation of illegal immigrants in Malaysia the applications for manual passport have increased manifolds in last few days.

"You, as the custodian officer need to sign in the stock register and deliver passports to the passport issuing officer from the stock. In order to do that your physical presence is required.

"Under these circumstances you are instructed to return to the post by 27 January to assist the investigation team."