



GOVT PLAN IN QUESTION

Draft policy to bring half of the population under safety net scheme comes under fire

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FIRST ODI TODAY

Mushfiqur is back to lead the Tigers against Sri Lanka

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BILAWAL SLAMS TALIBAN

Benazir Bhutto's son blasts the extremists for 'trying to drag Pakistan back to stone-age'

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POTATO THIS YEAR

Bane for farmers, boon for traders

SOHEL PARVEZ

Many of the country's seven lakh potato farmers are on the verge of bankruptcy due to fast falling prices of their produce.

Yet, the government is not doing much to ensure fair prices, ease export barriers and find new markets.

Analysts and industry operators say the recent moves to boost exports will not give the farmers an immediate respite.

The government should buy potato from growers to mop up the additional supply, and distribute those through social safety net schemes to help the prices rebound, they say.

Agriculture Minister Matia Chowdhury, however, said the government has no such plans; instead it is trying to find markets for exporting potato through the private sector.

"We are aggressively looking for new markets," she told The Daily Star over the phone.

She said around 30,000 tonnes of potato were already shipped to several countries, including Russia, in the current fiscal year.

"Exports will rise further," she said, adding that the prices will rebound in a month.

Earlier, Bangladesh Cold Storage Association had urged the government to buy potato from the market and distribute those under the safety net schemes such as VGD (vulnerable group development) and VGF (vulnerable group feeding).

But officials at the agriculture ministry

said the proposal is not viable as the government has no specialised warehouse to preserve potato.

The prices of potato at the farmers' end now stand at Tk 1.76-Tk 5 a kilogram, which is far below the production cost of around Tk 6, according to estimates by Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute.

In a novel protest against falling prices, farmers in the northern districts are dumping potatoes on highways, while policymakers are looking to boost exports as a way out.

"It is not possible to increase exports overnight," said Shaikh Abdul Quader, president of Bangladesh Potato Exporters Association.

Though the government has been providing 20 percent cash incentives for potato exports for the last several years, exports didn't pick up for lack of production of exportable varieties, said Quader.

The annual consumption of potato is 60-65 lakh tonnes against the production of 82 lakh tonnes a year. Of the total produce, 10 lakh tonnes are used as seed, according to Bangladesh Cold Storage Association.

REASONS BEHIND SUPPLY GLUT

In November and December last year, many farmers in the north put harvests on hold due to shutdowns and blockades.

Cold storage operators couldn't clear stocks in the wake of political unrest in the run-up to the January 5 national election.

As the political situation returned to normal after the polls, farmers began har-



Potatoes on a field in Munshiganj. Farmers have been protesting against low prices, high production and transportation costs of potatoes.

PHOTO: FILE

BY THE NUMBERS

Tk 2-5 a kg
Prices at farmers' end
Tk 6 a kg
Production cost

Tk 10-12 a kg
Market prices in Dhaka
60-65 lakh tonnes
Annual demand

82

lakh tonnes

Production a year

Rejoinder, our reply

The BNP issued a rejoinder to a report published in The Daily Star headlined "Sorry, Khaleda" on February 10. Following is the unedited full text of BNP's rejoinder, followed by our response:

I would like to draw your attention to the headlined story captioned "Sorry, Khaleda" published in the front page of the February 10th issue of the Daily Star. In the story, two of your colleagues have tried to find faults with the figures given by BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia at her press conference on 4th February of the dead, the victims of extra-judicial killing and the abducted leaders and workers of the BNP and members of the 19 Party

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Back to barbarism?

Gang subjects 4 women, 2 minor boys to horrific torture for recovery of 'stolen' gold ornaments

SHAEEN MOLLAH and WASIM BIN HABIB

The brutality would perhaps beat the barbarism of the medieval ages.

Four women, including an expecting mother and a teenager, were abused by a gang to get gold ornaments weighing some six tolas from one of their male family members.

The criminals undressed the four, aged between 13 and 22, in front of their male family members and put cricket stumps inside their private parts.

The culprits did not stop there. They filmed the scene and threatened to circulate it if the gold ornaments were not given to them.

They also beat up seven other members of the family, including two women and two minor boys.

The incident occurred at Bhasantek slum in the capital on Tuesday and came to light on Friday when one of the victims filed a case with Bhasantek Police Station. The complainant sued 13 people, including Mamun, known as a gang leader at the slum.

Three accused were arrested on Saturday, but Mamun and other main accused are on the run. The trio were taken on remand yesterday.

Police said Shobel, one of the 11 victims, is an accomplice of Mamun and the two had been stealing and mugging in the area for the past several months. Aged around 20, Shobel also lives in the slum.

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Two killed in 'crossfire'

STAR REPORT

Two suspected ring leaders of robbers were killed in separate incidents of "crossfire" between their cohorts and law enforcers in Jessore and Moulvibazar early yesterday.

With these two deaths, as many as 35 people have so far been killed in "crossfire" in alleged shootouts with police, Rab and joint forces since January this year, according to reports from different media and rights bodies.

The deceased were identified as Rajab Ali alias Kala Rajab, 45, of Keshabpur in Jessore, and Babul, 30, of Moulvibazar, report our district correspondents.

Rajab was accused in 23 cases, including murder and robbery, said Abdul Jalil, officer-in-charge (OC) of Keshabpur Police Station.

Police arrested Rajab from a place in Jhikargacha upazila around 11:15pm on Saturday, the OC said, adding that during preliminary interrogation, Rajab divulged details about his arms den.

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Toll 668 from 2009
Bar Council on extra-judicial killings

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A total of 668 people fell victim to extra-judicial killings by law enforcers since 2009, Khandker Mahbub Hossain, vice-chairman of Bangladesh Bar Council, said yesterday.

He demanded that the government gets the incidents of extra-judicial killings investigated by a judicial probe body led by a Supreme Court Judge.

Mahbub, also an adviser to the BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia, came up with the view while addressing a press conference at Bar Council Auditorium in the afternoon.

Citing reports from different newspapers, he

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ELECTED UNCONTESTED HC challenges RPO clause

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court yesterday asked why Section 19 of the Representation of People Order (RPO), which allows the Election Commission to declare uncontested candidates in parliamentary elections winners, should not be declared illegal.

In exercise of Section 19, the EC declared 153 candidates elected uncontested in the January 5 parliamentary elections, without a single vote being cast.

This denied more than half of the country's 9.19 crore voters the right to elect their representatives by exercising their franchise.

With the unprecedented number of lawmakers getting elected uncontested, the 10th parliamentary elections triggered widespread controversy over the acceptability of the polls, held amid a boycott by the then BNP-led 18-party opposition alliance.

The HC bench of Justice Mirza Hussain Haider and Justice Muhammad Khurshid Alam Sarkar came up with the rule after hearing a writ filed by Jatiya Party leader Khandker

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Two children wrap themselves with a towel and the long scarf of their mother as they travel on a rickshaw van near Shahbagh yesterday during the spring rain.

PHOTO:
SK ENAMUL HAQ

SUDDEN DRIZZLE

City life upset; farmers happy

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The sudden drizzle over the last two days across the country brought smiles to millions of Boro farmers, but it also disrupted the city life.

A popular Bangla proverb goes that if it rains in Falgun, cereal crops grow double (*Jodi borshe Fagune, China Kaun* digne).

The Met office said there was only five millimetres of rain in the capital between 8:00pm on Saturday and 6:00pm yesterday, but it brought back the chill and caused much trouble to the city dwellers.

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Selim warns diplomats

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Awami League presidium member Sheikh Fazlul Karim Selim in parliament yesterday asked diplomats stationed in Dhaka not to interfere in Bangladesh's internal affairs. He even went on to say that the government would take steps against them if they continued to do so.

"Maintain your diplomatic jurisdictions ... don't interfere into every single internal matter of the country. Give up your political

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