

Potato price jumps as smuggling on amid lax watch

S DILIP ROY, Lalmonirhat

Potato price has now doubled in the local market here as a good quantity of potatoes is being smuggled into India through Nagartari area of Mogholhat border in Lalmonirhat Sadar upazila every day during the Ramadan.

An organised smugglers syndicate is using the route for smuggling potatoes into India due to lax vigilance by Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), locals alleged.

Around 50 to 60 metric tonnes of potatoes are being smuggled into India every day, locals said.

Just a week ago, one kg of good quality potatoes was sold at Tk 15, medium quality potatoes at Tk 12 and low quality potatoes at Tk 9 in the local market. But now one kg of good quality potatoes is being sold at Tk 30, medium quality potatoes at Tk 24 and low quality potatoes at Tk 20 in the market.

Potato traders Abdul Miah and Nazrul Islam at Mogholhat Bazar said there is a huge supply of potatoes in the local market and the price would not be doubled if it is not smuggled into India.

As a group of smugglers are buying potatoes at a high rate, the local traders are selling potatoes at a high price in

the retail market, they said.

Hamidul Islam of Nagartari border village said he earns Tk 30 for taking one sack of potatoes (each sack contains 80 kgs of potatoes) to the zero line of the border from the local market by his bicycle.

At least 300 locals are engaged in this work and each of them can earn Tk 500 every day, he added.

Abdus Sattar, a member of a smuggler syndicate, claimed to be a "source" of BGB, said potato farmers are getting reasonable rates for their produce as potatoes are being smuggled into India.

BGB members are overlooking the potato smuggling in the interest of farmers, he said, adding that he and many other people are involved in potato trading in the border area.

However, Nayek Subedar Khademul Islam, camp commander of the Mogholhat BGB, said the BGB never allows anybody to smuggle potatoes into India.

Dodging the BGB's vigilance, smugglers can send potatoes into India through the border, he said.

Locals urged the authorities concerned to stop the potato smuggling in order to keep the potato price in the local market stable.



A weaver, in prayer cap, is engrossed in a hard bargain with a merchandiser at a bazaar of Jamdani saris in Noapara of Rugganj under Narayanganj yesterday. Over the decades, the weekly haat has become popular among both weavers and traders for the traditional saris woven on handlooms.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED



Kids killed while playing

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aged 13, with shrapnel in his chest; his cousin Motasem, 11, injured in his head and legs, and Mohammad Abu Watfah, 21, who was hit by shrapnel in his stomach.

A man who had been near them reached the hotel terrace first, scrambling up a steep sandy bank. A skinny man in his 30s, he groaned and held up a T-shirt already staining red with blood where he was hit in the stomach. He fainted and was carried to a taxi waved down in the street as he grew pale and limp.

The children were brought up next. Pulling up the T-shirt of the first boy, journalists administering first aid found a shrapnel hole, small and round as a pencil head, where he had been hit in the chest. Another boy, a brother or cousin, who was uninjured, slumped by the wall, weeping.

The injured boy cried in pain as the

journalists cleaned and dressed the wound, wrapping a field dressing around his chest. He winced in pain, clearly embarrassed too as a colleague checked his shorts to look for unseen femoral bleeding. A waiter grabbed a table cloth to use as a stretcher, but a photographer took the boy in his arms to carry him to the ambulance.

The Israeli military said it was speaking into the incident. The Israel Defence Force told the AFP in a statement: "Based on preliminary results, the target of this strike was Hamas terrorist operatives. The reported civilian casualties from this strike are a tragic outcome."

At the Shifa hospital on Wednesday afternoon, Hamad Bakr was conscious and waiting for surgery to remove the shrapnel from his chest and drain fluid from his chest cavity. "My father has a fishing boat there. We were playing hide and seek when we were hit. I didn't hear the first one which killed one of us but I

heard the second as we were running along the beach. That one killed three more."

His mother Taghrid, 35, came into the room. "Why did you go out of the door?" she demanded of Hamad.

She said that his brother, Younis, who was with Hamad, while he was being treated, "is so scared that he is shaking".

Suddenly angry and grief stricken, she said: "They killed my nephew. Who does that? Who fires on children?"

As the reporters left, Mohammad Abu Watfah was wheeled out of a lift after surgery to remove the shrapnel in his stomach. As relatives gathered not far from the Al-Deira hotel to bury the four dead boys, barely 90 minutes after the attack on the beach, the boys' uncle, Abdel Kareem Baker, 41, said: "It's a cold-blooded massacre. It's a shame they didn't identify them as kids with all of the advanced technology they claim they're using."

Giant hole at 'end of the world'

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been measured.

Researchers are being dispatched to investigate the hole, which has confounded scientists with its dramatic appearance.

Some have speculated it could have been made by a meteorite striking earth, an underground explosion, or is a sinkhole caused by collapsing rock, the Siberian Times reported.

One imaginative online commenter claimed it could even be evidence "of the arrival of a UFO craft" to the planet.

The area's name, Yamal, translates as the "end of the world" and the remote peninsula reaches into the Arctic Ocean.

It holds some of Russia's largest gas reserves and the crater appeared less than 20 miles from the biggest

gas field, Bovanenkovo.

The dark colour of the crater's sides was said in a Zvezda TV report to indicate "temperature processes" orburing.

Whatever caused it, it is large enough to comfortably fit several military helicopters in the entrance.

Experts from the Centre for the Study of the Arctic and the Cryosphere Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences will take samples of soil, air and water.

A spokesman for the Russian Emergencies Ministry's Yamal branch ruled out a meteorite but said it was too early to say what cause the crater.

Initial reports about the phenomenon were dismissed as fakes but evidence has proved its existence for the last two years.

Anna Kurchatova, from the Sub-

Arctic Scientific Research Centre, told the Siberian Times global warming could be a cause.

She believes the hole was formed by a mixture of water, salt and gas, igniting an underground explosion.

The gas had accumulated in ice mixed with sand beneath the surface of what was a sea 10,000 years ago, and ignited when the permafrost melted "like popping a champagne bottle", she claimed.

If her analysis is correct, another explosion could have worrying implications for the many underground gas pipelines running through the region.

The nearby Bovanenkovo field is of central importance to gas supplies from Siberia to the world.

Yamal is also known for its huge reindeer herds, which are managed by the indigenous Nenets.

Poison bank

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It also found "un-examined" blood being given to a cancer patient at the blood bank, Rogi Kallan Blood Bank and Day Care Centre.

The blood bank is just 300 yards from the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) responsible for monitoring the activities of blood banks and transfusion centres.

According to the licence rules, an authorised blood bank must recruit doctors, nurses and technicians to test blood for at least five diseases -- AIDS, hepatitis B, hepatitis C, syphilis and malaria -- before a blood transfusion.

But Rogi Kallan Blood Bank, which obtained its licence in 2009, had been running without any doctors and nurses and used to make fake test reports with forged signatures of physicians.

The blood bank's owners -- Rabiul

Islam, 40, Ripon Uddin, 35, Saidul Islam, 35, Abdul Aziz, 32 -- and Kalu Mia, 42, an agent, were jailed for two years for the offences, while lab operator Iqbal Kabir, 22, was sentenced to a year in prison.

The court also seized 32 bags of blood and sealed the blood bank in what was the second such drive conducted in less than four months, exposing the fact that some fraudulent people are running blood banks and transfusion centres in the city in violation of laws and required safety standards.

Swapan Kumar Tapadar, deputy director (hospital) of DGHS, told The Daily Star last night that they have not enough manpower to monitor the activities of over 2000 hospitals, clinics and blood banks in the capital.

Despite the acute manpower shortage,

they monitor hospitals, clinics and blood banks "as much as possible" and inspection is a must before issuance and renewal of licence, he said.

Being tipped-off, the mobile court carried out the drive. It saw Kalu Mia collecting blood from a drug addict.

Sixty-five-year-old cancer patient Tajul Sheikh at the time was being injected with blood that had not been tested for the diseases and a staff of the blood bank was selling a bag of blood to an attendant of a patient of National Institute of Traumatology Orthopaedics and Rehabilitation (Pongu Hospital) with a test report, the executive magistrate said.

The court found that the report bore a forged signature of a doctor.

Quizzed about the matter, another staff Iqbal confessed to making the report without any test on instructions of the

owners, Anwar Pasha said.

The sentences were handed down as per the Safe Blood Transfusion Act, 2002.

The owners have committed crimes by running the blood bank in an unhealthy environment without the availability of doctors, nurses and efficient technicians round the clock and live-saving equipment, the magistrate said.

The blood bank had operated even before obtaining the licence, local people said, with a big signboard hung on the building along the main road, which houses the storage.

Majnu Sheikh, son of Tajul, the cancer patient from Manikganj, told a correspondent of The Daily Star, who was present there during the raid, that his father had been undergoing cancer treatment at Mohakhali Cancer Hospital for the last one month and on

Wednesday doctors told the family to arrange for an immediate blood transfusion.

"Within a few minutes, a man came to me and said he would manage blood," he said, adding that he had given Tk 1,700 to the man for blood.

Regarding blood collection from drug addicts, Abdul Aziz, one of the owners, said people usually did not come to the blood bank on their own and so they used to get blood donors through agents like Kalu.

"We are aware that most of the donors are drug addicts but we have nothing to do since 'normal' people do not come here," he said.

He, however, claimed that technicians usually carried out some "essential tests" before selling blood.

Another owner Rabiul Islam said the blood bank usually collected and sold

10-15 bags of blood daily. They bought one bag of blood of positive groups for Tk 350 while negative groups for Tk 700 but sold one bag at Tk 1,000 to Tk 2,500.

The Rab executive magistrate said law enforcers had sealed 28 such blood banks and transfusion centres -- some licensed while some undocumented -- mostly in the capital. As many as 54 people were also sentenced to different terms and fined in the last five years.

A mobile court in March raided Dhaka Blood Centre in the capital's Bakshibazar, sealed it and sentenced three persons to different jail terms.

The highest punishment given in the drives was two-year imprisonment.

A total of 77 licensed private blood banks and transfusion centres are now operating across the country, sources said.

Ex-chairman in thick of things

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government-backed chairman abused his power to play an active role behind the loan scam.

As to whether BASIC directors were unlawfully involved in any administrative activities, loan sanction, write-off, interest waiver and rescheduling, the observer stated that the chairman "actively influenced every matter presented to the board".

In November 2013, the central bank felt it necessary to appoint the observer after the bank's board and management were found involved in serious anomalies. Eventually, the bank last year incurred a loss of around Tk 43.2 crore, the first such incident in its 25 years of operation, whereas it was one of the best-run banks only four years ago.

The observer submitted a number of reports on the situation of BASIC Bank on various occasions. The central bank has sent those reports to the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) for conducting further probe into the irregularities involving around Tk 4,500 crore loan scam and take punitive action against the culprits.

According to the report, Bacchu and sacked managing director of the bank Kazi Faqurul Islam had attempted to carry on their murky financial activities even in the presence of observer Ashok Kumar Dey, a

general manager of the central bank.

Their greed reached such a level that the duo not only forced the bank to dole out loans to borrowers with fake documents, but included false agenda in the minutes of board meetings as well.

For example, following the insistence of the observer, the board decided to seek an explanation from the then MD as to why 106 proposals involving Tk 1,354 crore loan were included in the minutes without any discussion at the 327th board meeting in December last year.

It was decided that the issue would top the agenda of the 329th meeting held in April this year and will be placed at the 330th meeting the same month for approval.

But the minutes skipped the agenda, prompting the observer to intervene and ask the board to look into the issue.

The board then included a false and distorted agenda without explaining what it was asked to do.

Under the headline of "Confirmation of the minutes of the 328th meeting of the Board of Directors," the first agenda reads: "While the item came up for discussion, the Observer recalling the minutes of the 327th meeting of the Board of Directors of the Bank wanted to know the reason for inclusion of additional

106 proposals in the said minutes without holding any discussion on the same in the meeting. In reply, it was informed that with the consent of the Chair, proposals pending for rescheduling/regulation and some other important issues were incorporated in the minutes to save the Bank from the burden of further classification."

This incident in particular hints at the former chairman's active role behind the embezzlement of Tk 4,500 crore of the state bank.

Instead of explaining the irregularities, the former MD resorted to another count of deception by incorporating distorted and false statement in the minutes of the 329th board meeting, the observer stated.

"The MD attempted to change the decision of the board meeting tactfully," said the report.

Through the 106 proposals, loans with serious irregularities were rescheduled and renewed and even their grace period was extended.

"This kind of activity is a gross violation of banking norms and rules, and amounts to deception and fraud," says the observer's report.

The BB investigations identified massive financial anomalies involving the said amount of loans in Dilkusha, Gulshan and Shantinagar branches of BASIC Bank between 2009 and 2013. Later in May this

year, the central bank suspended all loan proceedings in these branches.

Earlier, the government dissolved the seven-member board of the trouble-ridden bank over its role in the irregularities.

Bacchu stepped down from the post of chairman earlier this month while the central bank removed MD Faqurul Islam on May 25.

The BB report sent to the ACC said many borrowers withdrew money from the bank through pay orders and in cash using names of companies that do not even exist.

RK Food Ltd, for instance, took out Tk 59.85 crore from the bank, MRL Oil and Poultry Industries Tk 59.47 crore, Well Tex Ltd Tk 44 crore, S Resource Shipping Lines Tk 30.50 crore, Shifan Shipping Lines Tk 37.45 crore, Asian Shipping Lines Tk 23 crore, Anam Socks Ltd Tk 12.31 crore, Adib Dyeing Mills Ltd Tk 28 crore, Gazi Auto Bricks Tk 24 crore and Belayet Navigation Tk 24 crore.

The clients named in the BB report also include SBI Trading having borrowed Tk 15 crore, Dove Enterprise Tk 16.72 crore, Ruddraw Specialised Cold Storage Tk 19 crore, SM Auto Bricks Tk 13.52 crore, Novo Auto Bricks Tk 29.90 crore and Kings Trading Tk 2 crore.

Rail won't ease

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The number of trains leaving Chittagong for Dhaka, Feni and Sylhet did not increase. Currently, a total of 14 trains, including seven intercity, run on these routes. Two special trains will run between Chittagong and Feni for three days before Eid day, our Chittagong office reported.

However, this year the authorities will keep trains on standby at Kamalapur Railway Station in case of delays in the arrival of trains.

The authorities will also try not to allow passengers to get on board trains from Joydevpur or Airport stations since a large number of people, mostly

without tickets, occupy the compartments beforehand from these two stations instead of going to Kamalapur.

As a result, passengers waiting at the Kamalapur Railway Station often find it difficult to get on board even with tickets.

All trains arriving at Kamalapur will be vacated first and then the ticket holders will be allowed to get on board, an official at the Kamalapur Railways Station said.

No freight trains will run in the country from three days prior to Eid, apart from those carrying food and fuel, the official added.

Guilty, initially

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supporters to occupy a polling station during the voting hours.

The probe committee has recommended further investigation into the allegation before making any decision regarding the matter, according to a probe report submitted to the Election Commission.

On June 29, the returning officer appointed by the EC asked the electoral committee to investigate the matter.

EC's acting secretary Sirazul Islam on the day said the enquiry committee would submit a report within three

days as per the electoral law. However, the report was submitted on July 9.

The report will be placed at the EC's next meeting, a senior assistant secretary of the EC Secretariat told The Daily Star.

The commission will then decide on the next course of action, he added. Selim Osman, brother of Shamim Osman, won the by-election, in which huge fake votes were cast by supporters of Selim Osman, according to news reports and election observers.

The constituency fell vacant after their brother Nasim Osman died on April 30.