

PM, Khaleda send Eid greetings to each other

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, topmost leaders of the country's two biggest political parties, yesterday exchanged greetings by sending cards to each other's office on the occasion of Eid-ul Azha.

On behalf of the prime minister, her protocol officer SM Khurshid-ul-Alam handed over the card to Khaleda's special assistant Shimul Biswas at her Gulshan office in the afternoon, according to the PMO office.

A three-member BNP team later visited Hasina's Dhanmondi office and handed over the PM's card to an AL deputy secretary Sekandar Ali, a BNP joint office secretary told The Daily Star.

In spite of this friendly gesture, political analysts believe the two most influential leaders of the country nurture an irreconcilable rivalry as they usually do not attend the same programme.

It was only after the fall of HM Ershad's government more than two decades ago that they had held meaningful talks on establishing democracy in the country.

They have since hardly been found

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Strong current of the Bangalee river erodes the approach road to a bridge in Dewantala of Gabindaganj in Gaibandha. The road is still open despite the risk of being devoured by the river.

PHOTO: BANGLAR CHOKH

Politics now means to make quick bucks

Says Dr Kamal

UNB, Dhaka

Eminent jurist Dr Kamal Hossain yesterday said politics in the country has now turned into a profession where politicians use it to make quick bucks.

"In the past, politics meant dedication of life for realising people's rights. Accumulating wealth and securing children's future were not part of politics. Now, politics has turned into an abuse of power," he told a discussion at the Institution of Engineers Bangladesh.

Good Governance Forum organised the discussion on "Judge Impeachment-Justice-Good Governance".

Also the president of Gono Forum, Dr Kamal said section 70 of the Constitution has destroyed parliament. He slammed the 16th amendment to the Constitution as it was passed hurriedly without any consultation with experts. "Why the 16th amendment has been passed at a supersonic speed?"

Criticising the present trend of student politics, he said, "When we

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Eid home-goers on risky trips

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Eid. At times, they break down causing long tailbacks within minutes.

Hundreds of vehicles remained stranded on Dhaka-Tangail highway for hours on Sunday and Monday after three trucks went out of order on the road, reports our Tangail correspondent.

Vehicular movement slowed down on the two-lane highway as more vehicles, including buses and cattle-carrying trucks, hit the motorway on Tuesday night. Around 500 policemen were working there to ensure uninterrupted vehicular movement.

On average, 20,000 vehicles ply the highway to 10 northern districts and five southern districts. Many others go to Mymensingh, Jamalpur, Sherpur and Netrakona through the highway every day. But the number doubles ahead of Eid.

Outdated and unfit buses hit highways before Eid every year and many of those break down or face accidents, leading to gridlock, said Osman Ali, general secretary of Bangladesh Sarak

Paribahan Sramik Federation.

Journey time is likely to be longer for people travelling on Dhaka-Chittagong and Dhaka-Mymensingh highways for ongoing expansion work.

Contractors, who are to suspend work during Eid holidays, have piled up construction materials on the highways, disrupting vehicular movement.

According to our Gazipur correspondent, vehicular movement was slow on the battered highway from Joydevpur to Mawna. Moreover, the vehicles had to change lanes at many points due to expansion work on Dhaka-Mymensingh highway.

Before the vehicles reached the highway, they faced a chaotic situation on the road from Tongi bridge to Joydevpur intersection. A half-an-hour journey took up to two hours.

Vehicles travelling to Sylhet via Tongi are likely to face a similar situation, as the road is very narrow and in a bad shape.

Chittagong-bound vehicles may face tailbacks at Kanchpur, Sonargaon,

Signboard and Sanarpar after crossing chaotic Sayedabad and Jatrabari areas.

Amin Bazar as well as Savar Bazar will be major bottlenecks for those travelling to southern and northern districts.

LAUNCHES

The latest shipping ministry circular allowing launches to carry equal number of passengers both in day and at night will encourage launch operators to carry more passengers this time.

"I think the government has introduced the new rule to legitimise overloading of launches," said water transport expert Mir Tareque Ali, professor of Naval Architecture and Marine Engineering at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet).

Every year, the government forms monitoring committees for checking overloading of launches but they don't work.

Seeking anonymity, an official of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA), said, "No system or rule works in the two or three days ahead of Eid because of massive rush

of passengers. What can we do?"

All launches that left the capital's Sadarghat terminal yesterday were crowded with passengers. Many of whom were on roofs of the launches, which is not permitted by rules.

TRAINS

Thousands of people eager to travel home by train before Eid face the same old ticket crisis. The railway's passenger-carrying capacity remains the same while the number of passengers has risen steadily.

Ahead of Eid, around one lakh people will be transported by 46 trains -- 29 intercity and 18 mail and commuter trains -- that operate daily from Dhaka to different districts.

In addition, around 12,000 passengers are likely to travel standing inside coaches or sitting on the roof of trains, say railway officials.

Three special intercity trains will run on Khulna, Parbatipur and Jamalpur routes on October 3, 4 and 5. But they will hardly be able to handle the pressure of large number of passengers.

The railway authorities have put

restrictions on plying of freight trains for three days before Eid.

FERRY SERVICE

As in the past, congestion at ferry terminals is a big headache for the authorities this time as a limited number of ferries is unable to transport so many vehicles.

A total of 18 ferries will operate on Paturia-Daulatdia route and 16 on Mawa-Kawrakandi route, while the number of vehicles on the routes is likely to more than double today.

Usually, 700-800 vehicles cross Mawa-Kawrakandi route every day, but the number exceeds the 2,000 mark during Eid, said Sirajul Haq, BIWTC manager at Mawa.

At least 150 vehicles were in a queue for ferries at Mawa yesterday afternoon, reports our Munshiganj correspondent.

Navigability problem on Mawa-Kawrakandi route is another major concern for the authorities as it may disrupt ferry service.

More than 50 buses and 100 trucks remained stranded at Paturia.

Outages back with gas shortage

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Petrobangla, there has been a constant gas supply shortfall of 500 million cubic feet a day (mmcf), almost a quarter of the available supply.

But after gas was diverted back to fertiliser factories in August, the supply pressure across the country plummeted.

"We have launched a new gas compressor station at Ashuganj recently to improve gas supply pressure. But the demand has shot up so much that it is unable to maintain a desired gas pressure. If we increase gas compression too much, there will not be any gas upstream [gas producing areas in and around Sylhet]," said a GTCL official, adding, "We must simply have more gas upstream."

A Titas official said, "Over the years, non-bulk consumers which represent industries, commercial operations and domestic connections, have significantly grown. Whereas Titas distributes 1,500 mmcf gas, 900 mmcf gas is consumed by non-bulk customers. This

year, non-bulk customers are using more than 900 mmcf gas, contributing to the gas crisis."

A Petrobangla official added, "In addition, unchecked gas theft in different parts of the country led by political leaders and hoodlums is contributing to the crisis."

From Brahmanbaria to Dhaka, political leaders have taken money from people to give them thousands of illegal gas connections. They deploy pipeline contractors to perforate the main gas line and install illegal connections. These leaders have such clout that when Titas Gas teams visit the sites to disconnect illegal connections, they attack them and foil all attempts. There are many cases in which Titas gas staffs had to be hospitalised.

"We have repeatedly written to the district administration to help us get rid of these illegal connections. The government knows each and every politician and hoodlums involved in this but it won't take any action; neither would it legalise the illegal con-

nections," said the Petrobangla official.

According to Petrobangla, the situation would not ease until US oil company Chevron completes its Bibiyana gas field expansion project later this year to increase gas production by 300 mmcf.

"Meanwhile, we should prepare a gas demand-supply calendar for the next year. As you know power demands drop during the winter and go up in summer. Similarly, the fertiliser factories do not produce fertiliser all year round. Whereas the demand of the industrial consumers is steady. Therefore, if we maintain a calendar, the gas re-distribution around the year could be more optimised to achieve best results," he added.

At the same time, the government should consider replacing inefficient power and fertiliser factories and motivate the private sector to upgrade their captive power generation and boilers with more gas-efficient machines.

Diversify crops, change diets

FROM PAGE 16

International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), a Washington-based food policy think-tank, in association with the Bangladesh government and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) organised the daylong workshop where two ministers, experts and stakeholders attended.

To reduce dependency on such rice-centric diet, IFPRI Chief of Party in Bangladesh Akhter Ahmed told the workshop, "We've to diversify agriculture to diversify diet."

Although child malnutrition dropped from 60 percent to 40 percent in the country over the last two decades, the situation still remains very challenging, experts noted.

According to a separate presentation by the UN World Food Programme (WFP) Country Representative Christa Rader, 41 percent of children under five are stunted in the country while 36 percent are underweight and 16 percent wasted.

The concerns over the rice-centric agriculture came at a time when

Bangladesh produced a record output of rice (over 34 million MT) this year and decided to export 50,000 MT of rice to Sri Lanka.

Bangladesh was a food-deficit country in 1971 when the population was less than half and rice production a third of the present output.

Appreciating Bangladesh's successes in cutting poverty rates in past two decades and the resilience of its people, IFPRI Director General Shenggen Fan said, "Rice is still very dominant here. Crop diversity is still missing. Stunting, wasting and paediatric anaemia are still very high."

Experts, however, noted that if crops are diversified and social safety net programmes (SSNPs) accompanied by nutrition education are well designed targeting the poor and vulnerable groups, things would change for the better very fast.

In her address as the chief guest, Agriculture Minister Matia Chowdhury attached importance to good governance in making the SSNPs a success. Bangladesh currently spends 12 percent

of its annual budget on SSNPs.

She defended government's farm subsidy policy by saying, "We're funding subsidies from own budget and not taking from the donors."

Speaking at the opening session of the workshop, the USAID Mission Director in Bangladesh Janina Jaruzelski said that becoming self-sufficient in rice production is a huge accomplishment.

"However, to attain true food security, improve health and stop vicious cycle of poverty, poor nutrition and stunting, Bangladesh needs to diversify agricultural production both to enhance rural income and to improve the nutritional value of the diets of the poor," she added.

Food Minister Qamrul Islam delivered the opening speech while Agriculture Secretary SM Nazmul Islam and economist Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman chaired two subsequent technical sessions. Those sessions included presentations of eight papers on various topics ranging from seed to fisheries, to rice stock policy to women empowerment in agriculture.

Iraqi PM opposes

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He warned that "international and regional polarisation" had contributed to the rise of ISIS - which has announced the creation of a "caliphate" in the large swathes of Iraq and Syria under its control - and said he wanted to improve relations with neighbouring countries.

Abadi, a Shia Arab, formed a unity government in September after the resignation of Nouri Maliki, who was accused by Iraq's minority Sunni Arabs and Kurds of monopolising power and pursuing sectarian policies.

The US-led coalition has conducted more than 230 air strikes on IS positions in Iraq since August. The operation was expanded into Syria on 22 September, since when there have been more than 70 strikes.

Earlier, US-led forces carried out air strikes on IS militants battling Kurdish fighters around the northern Syrian border town of Kobane.

Tens of thousands of people have fled across the border into Turkey since IS launched an offensive on the city two weeks ago.

With ISIS fighters less than three kilometres from the town, the US-led coalition carried out at least five air strikes yesterday, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The Britain-based monitoring group said

the strikes hit IS fronts south and southeast of the town adding that at least eight jihadist fighters were killed in one of them.

One other jihadist and nine Kurdish fighters were killed in the overnight clashes, it said.

If ISIS fighters were to capture Kobane, also known as Ayn al-Arab, it would give the group unbroken control of a long stretch of the Syrian-Turkish border.

Meanwhile, at least 30 Syrian children were killed yesterday in a double bombing by a lone assailant at a school in the government-controlled city of Homs, a monitor said.

They were among 39 people who died in the attack in the Akrameh neighbourhood, according to a new toll from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack. The toll is among the highest for children in suicide attacks across Syria since the conflict erupted in the country three years ago.

In Iraq, Kurdish fighters were advancing against IS militants on three fronts, with support from British and US air strikes. Backed by 11 coalition strikes, Kurdish forces went on the offensive on Tuesday in the town of Rabia on the Syrian border, north of jihadist-controlled second city Mosul, and south of oil hub Kirkuk, commanders said.

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