

Blockade a real bane to farmers

Vegetables growers suffer losses as supply chain disrupted

AZIBOR RAHMAN, Jhenidah

With road links largely cut off amid the indefinite blockade, vegetable growers in the district have been facing losses as they are selling their produce at local markets at throwaway prices.

Failing to recoup the production costs, some are even feeding their cattle with vegetables.

Farmers said they usually send at least 50 percent of their produce to Karwanbazar and Shyambazar in Dhaka, Chittagong, Barisal and Comilla. But the wholesalers are not buying enough vegetables as the supply chain has been hit hard by the blockade.

Farmer Altaf Hossain of Kotchandpur bazar in Moheshpur upazila said he produced beans and green chilli on his three-bigha of land

in this season. He has already harvested about half the crops and sold beans at Tk 20 to Tk 25 per kg a few days ago, which now sells only at Tk 2 a kg. He earned Tk 80 for a kg of green chilli, but now the price has come down to Tk 20 per kg.

Altaf feared he would not be able to pay the traders the prices of pesticides and fertilisers he had bought on credit from a local market.

Most farmers in Jhenidah are facing the same problem as vegetable grower Sukur Ali of Baroghigati village under Kaliganj upazila is in. He could not recoup 20 percent of his production costs by selling his produce.

Vegetable trader Bablur Rahman of Kaliganj said the nonstop blockade has ruined their business as they could not send vegetables to other districts.



Vegetable growers at Khalispur Bazar in Moheshpur of Jhenidah sit idle with their produce with hardly any customers or wholesalers around. The nationwide blockade has disrupted shipment of vegetables to markets. PHOTO: AZIBOR RAHMAN

Silenced by salinity

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Now almost the entire year, land and canals are used mainly for farming brackish water shrimp that is exported to Europe and the US.

As a result, Muroti's family, now being fed by her 32-year-old son Washington Halder, has to buy all the rice for a year from the market.

People in her village and most other localities under Mongla upazila of Bagerhat now have to depend on the market for rice though paddy cultivation was once their livelihood.

Similar is the story for people in parts of Rampal upazila of the same district, and some areas of Shyamnagar upazila of Satkhira.

Rising salinity has taken a toll on crop production and thus turned these southwestern coastal areas into a food buying zone, according to locals and crop acreage figures of the government.

"Even a decade ago, rice grown on our land was enough to meet all the needs of our family. We also had surplus rice," said Muroti, sitting in front of their wooden house. They used to yield 200-300 maunds of paddy a year.

Just beside her house, several-acre low-lying land was seen submerged in saline water -- no crops, no green shoots. The land is for shrimp farming.

In the past, people in these coastal areas depended largely on transplanted Aman rice to ensure the supply of their staple food. And during the early years of shrimp cultivation, farmers cultivated both rice and shrimp on their fields.

But over the years, Aman acreage fell gradually due to rising salt content in soil, resulting mainly from continued saline water retention on farmland for shrimp cultivation and congestion in canals.

In Mongla upazila, Aman crop area fell 30 percent to 14,925 acres in 2008 from 21,350 acres in 1996, according

to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics.

As a result, rice production in the area fell and so did cropping intensity.

During fiscal 2013-14, Aman area was 5,020 acres and 6,277 tonnes of rice was produced. The Mongla upazila records the annual demand for foodgrain at 27,286 tonnes.

Officials and locals said crop production and acreage fell drastically due to increased salinity after the cyclone Aila in 2009.

In case of Rampal, Aman area plunged 33 percent to 22,815 acres in 2008 from 34,010 acres twelve years ago, according to the BBS.

"We stopped cultivating rice fifteen years ago as the yield was very poor due to salinity," said Romen Mandal, a resident at Chandpai union under Mongla upazila.

Mohammad Abdul Halim, a small farmer at Shyamnagar upazila of Satkhira, said once rice could be grown on all croplands in their union. Now the acreage has come down to one-fourth due to salinity, he said, adding that five out of 12 unions under Shyamnagar suffer the same fate.

"My tension rises when rice prices go up," he said.

Abdullah Al Mamun, agriculture officer of Mongla upazila, admitted that the coastal area has turned into a food-deficit region. "People have become market-dependent," he said.

"Salinity is a curse. Aus and Boro rice cannot be grown here, while Aman cultivation also faces setback. None of the varieties can tolerate such a high level of salinity."

Cultivable land has come down drastically due to salinity, he added.

More than two lakh hectares of land in the south have lost potential for agriculture due to increasing salt content over the past four decades, according to Soil Resource Development Institute (SRDI) of the government.

SRDI data shows that the level of

salinity in these areas ranges from 12 dS/m to more than 16 dS/m (deci Siemens per metre, a unit for measuring salinity).

Soil scientists and water experts had earlier told this correspondent that such a high level of salinity is beyond the tolerable limits of rice, majority varieties of which survive and thrive below 4 dS/m.

"Plants cannot absorb sufficient amount of water due to high salt concentration. In this situation, plants actually die from water stress or drought in most soil if the soluble salt concentration is high," according to Southern Master Plan for Agricultural Development.

"Plants also suffer from toxicities of specific salt and nutritional imbalances."

The master plan was jointly launched by the agriculture ministry and the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation last year.

To ensure food security, many farmers in these coastal areas -- Mongla and Rampal -- tried to grow saline-tolerant rice during the Boro season in recent years.

But the level of salinity in the soil was so high that even these stress-tolerant and improved varieties, released by agricultural research institutes, did not prove profitable for growers, farmers and agriculture officials said.

Mamun, citing some farmers in Mongla upazila, said: "Experiences were not good."

Not only rice farming, trees such as betel nuts and coconuts as well as livestock also take the blow of rising salinity.

CHANGES IN LIVELIHOODS
Now the main livelihood of Muroti's family and others in the southwestern coastal belt is shrimp cultivation.

Her family began shrimp cultivation in 1995 and gradually expanded area. Today, her son Washington

Halder cultivates brackish water shrimp on all the 14 acres (5.66 hectares) of their cropland.

Official data shows shrimp cultivation has grown over the years due to a rising export demand, government's policy support and financing by multilateral lenders such as World Bank.

The area under shrimp farming was 55,312 hectares in 1984 and rose to 2.75 lakh hectares in fiscal 2012-13, according to the BBS and the Department of Fisheries.

Washington said they earn Tk 4 lakh a year from shrimp farming, better than what they would get from rice cultivation.

But salinity did not impact rice cultivation only; it also affected livestock, vegetables and fruits. So given all the losses, shrimp cultivation is not as profitable as rice farming, said Washington, one of the 8.33 lakh shrimp farmers, who help bring more than \$500 million from shrimp exports a year.

However, income varies from one year to another due to disease attacks on shrimp farms and price fluctuations in the global market.

Shrimp farmers in the locality said frequency of disease attacks has risen in recent years. Prices also went down of late.

During the early days of shrimp farming, Washington Halder and his neighbours were excited as incomes were better and investment was low.

Romen Mandal, who has 1.3 acres of land, said disease attacks on shrimp farms are now a major concern.

"Many of us harvest shrimp early to avoid losses. Our harvests have almost halved," he said.

Washington said he follows suggestions of fisheries officials to ensure a good harvest. Even after that, he incurs losses due to outbreak of diseases.

"But as I grow shrimp on my own land, it does not affect me much. But

those who grow shrimp on leased land really fall in trouble."

Mohammad Shah Alam Sheikh, a shrimp farmer at Chandpai union under Mongla, said planned farming provides higher benefit to growers.

Their incomes also depend largely on the prices of shrimp in the global market, he said.

After reduced earnings in fiscal 2012-13, shrimp growers fetched higher incomes the following year as exports soared.

Shrimp exports again slipped 4.55 percent year-on-year to \$276 million in July-November this fiscal year, according to Export Promotion Bureau.

As demand fell, prices of shrimp also declined in recent months -- to Tk 350-Tk 400 each kilogram (40 pieces) now, from Tk 700-Tk 800 in June last year, Sheikh said.

"We all, from big to small farmers, are incurring losses because of the fall in prices," he said. "Our wellbeing is now linked with disease attacks on farms and prices on the international markets."

As a cushion against these adversities, many shrimp growers in the coastal region have started cultivating carp and tilapia fishes along with shrimp. Some switched to crab farming.

Washington Halder has been growing carp for the last several years, especially during monsoon when salinity subsides.

"We get at best five to six months to cultivate these fishes. We have to harvest them before the rise of salinity in March-April," he said.

But it would be better if he could grow carp throughout the year, along with rice, he said. "Once, we grew rice and fish, including shrimp, together. We also could rear cows."

"It's unfortunate that we have croplands but we cannot grow our staple food."

Japanese foreign minister meets Modi

AFP, New Delhi

Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida met Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday at the start of a two-day trip aimed at boosting ties between Asia's second and third largest economies.

Kishida's trip comes on the heels of the crushing win of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in national polls last month and a visit by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Japan in August-September.

Abe, a right-wing nationalist likened to Modi for his zeal for economic reforms, has been keen to shore up ties with New Delhi to counter an increasingly assertive China.

Modi too signalled the high priority he accorded to Japan by making the trip to Tokyo -- his first bilateral visit outside South Asia since taking office last May.

There was no immediate word on the outcome of the talks with Modi which lasted around half an hour. The two men were pictured smiling and shaking hands at the start of their meeting.

UN urges

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ensure that the arrest and detention of key opposition leaders by law enforcement agencies is not arbitrary, and that all measures taken to restore law and order are conducted in line with the parameters set by international human rights law, including respect for the freedoms of peaceful assembly, movement and speech.

The statement comes on the 11th day of the blockade called by BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia after she failed to come out of her Gulshan office to hold a rally to mark the first anniversary of the January 5 polls as the "Democracy Killing Day".

The government, meanwhile, imposed a ban on demonstrations and prevented the chairperson and other senior members of the BNP from participating in protests.

"Since then, over a dozen people have reportedly been killed and hundreds injured in clashes between supporters of the two parties, as well as with security forces. A number of key opposition leaders have also been arrested," read the statement.

"Particularly disturbing is the rampant use of arson attacks on vehicles."

Referring to two major violent incidents on January 13, it said a crowded public bus was set on fire burning to death four people including one child. The same day, a senior BNP adviser was shot at and his car set on fire.

Land port

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vandalised across the country in the last 11 days. Apprehension of such attacks among truck owners and drivers played a key role behind the shortage.

Under these circumstances, the Indian mission in Dhaka sent a letter to the home ministry via the foreign ministry on January 14, expressing concerns that perishable goods would rot inflicting huge losses on Indian exporters, if the trucks remain stranded longer.

It requested the Bangladesh government to take necessary measures to unload the goods and ensure smooth movement of those trucks to their destinations on an emergency basis.

The C&F agents on the Indian side had recently made the same request to the port authorities.

Following the embassy letter, the home ministry asked police, BGB and Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) to ensure safe movement of those trucks, sources said.

State Minister for Home Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal told The Daily Star on Thursday night that he had already given necessary directives and the situation would be normal at the port in a day or two.

While safety is cited as a major issue, the local commander of Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) also questioned the willingness of the port staff to end the deadlock.

"We have orders from the higher authorities to make the port operational. But if labourers, truck drivers and C&F agents do not work, we have nothing to do," Commanding Officer of the 9 BGB Battalion Lt Col Abu Zafar Sheikh Mohammad Bazlul Haque told The Daily Star.

"We are ready to provide all security for smooth operation of the port," he added.

Nurul Bashir of the port Customs said the government would ensure security but those involved in loading and unloading goods have to resume work first.

After visiting the port yesterday, our Chapainawabganj correspondent reported that perishable goods like ginger and onions in the trucks had already started rotting.

JCD leader killed

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Motiu admitted to have torched and hurled crude bombs at goods-laden trucks at Muslimpur and Rasulpur of Shibganj on Wednesday, the major said.

A Rab team then took Motiu to a mango orchard in Kansat "for arresting his accomplices and recovering arms and explosives" around 3:00am, he claimed.

He said Motiu's accomplices started firing indiscriminately and throwing homemade bombs at the Rab team forcing the Rab men to retaliate and sparking a 20-minute "gunfight".

Motiu sustained bullet injuries while trying to flee and had died on the spot, he said, adding that a pistol, a revolver, two light guns, two other guns, three magazines, five bullets, 17 crude bombs, 10 petrol bombs and five sharp weapons were found on the spot.

Rab media wing claimed that Motiu was the main man behind the arson and bomb attacks on vehicles that had been carried out during BNP-led 20-party alliance's blockade.

However, Motiu's father Unshakh Ali Montu said, "Rab took him away unlawfully from an eggplant field near his house and killed him. I want justice after proper investigation."

Motiu was a student of Kansat Soleyman Ali Degree College and the vice-president of JCD's Shyampur union.

Shahjahan Mia, president of Chapainawabganj district BNP and district coordinator of 20-party alliance, alleged Motiu was a victim of "extrajudicial killing".

The joint forces of Rab, BGB and police are carrying out atrocities in some areas of Chapainawabganj. They

have orders from the government to kill. They raided some villages of Shibganj-Kansat and killed opposition leaders and activists, torched many of their houses," BNP's Joint Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi said.

Rab said criminals had been torching and hurling crude bombs and petrol bombs at goods-laden trucks and vehicles of law enforcers almost every day in Chapainawabganj.

The elite force claimed to have been conducting special drives to control the situation since Thursday.

Meanwhile, pro-blockade pickets torched and vandalised several vehicles and exploded crude bombs in the capital and several districts on the 11th day of the ongoing blockade.

At least 11 vehicles were burnt across the country yesterday, seven of them in Dhaka, said fire service officials. Our correspondents, however, have reported five more incidents of arson attacks on vehicles.

In Sirajganj, a trucker suffered burns after blockaders hurled petrol bombs at his tomato-laden truck near the Bangabandhu Bridge late Thursday.

In Feni, blockaders hurled a petrol bomb at a truck near Charipur BSCIC Industrial Area, burning the driver, and set fire to a CNG-run three-wheeler at Chairman Ghat.

In Noakhali, pro-blockade pickets set fire to a vegetable laden truck at Mandari Bazar, leaving five including the driver and his assistant with burn injuries. The assistant was sent to Dhaka Medical College Hospital in a critical condition.

Two trucks and a lorry were torched at Sitakunda's Fakirhat in Chittagong late Thursday night.

Arson attacks on a truck in Rajshahi and a lorry in Barisal were also reported.

New terror strike feared in Europe

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received indications that the extremist group ISIS may have started directing European adherents in Syria and Iraq to launch attacks in their home countries, a senior European counterterrorism official told CNN terrorism analyst Paul Cruickshank.

The official said security agencies in a number of European countries were investigating groups of returnees from Syria and Iraq, including people back on Belgian soil, who they suspect could be plotting terrorist attacks.

Belgian police raided an Islamist cell planning attacks against police yesterday as dozens of people were arrested in sweeps across Europe, keeping the continent on alert one week after the Paris attacks.

Two suspected jihadists were shot dead in a police raid in the eastern Belgian town of Verviers on Thursday night and prosecutors said 13 suspects had been detained across Belgium, with two more held in France.

Belgian authorities said Thursday's raids were part of an operation investigating a cell that included people returning from Syria and that was about to carry out major terrorist attacks in Belgium.

Belgian federal prosecutor Eric Van der Sypt said: "This operation was meant to dismantle a terrorist cell, not only the terrorist cell but also the logistic network behind it."

Meanwhile, French police separately detained 12 people in the suburbs of Paris in connection with last week's attacks on the Charlie Hebdo satirical magazine, a Jewish supermarket and a policewoman, in which 17 people were killed.

The Gare de l'Est train station in Paris was evacuated for an hour over a bomb threat yesterday, train operator SNCF told the BBC. Services resumed at 09:00 local time, SNCF said, without giving further

details.

A man who holed up in a post office in a suburb northwest of Paris with two hostages yesterday surrendered and has been arrested, a police source said.

"There was no assault, the man gave himself up", the source said, adding that the hostages were "shocked but not injured," source added.

French authorities say that about 120,000 police and soldiers are now mobilised across France and that anti-terror plans remain in place.

Hundreds of German police meanwhile raided alleged Islamist sites in Berlin, arresting two men suspected of being part of a group planning to carry out an attack in Syria.

The raids highlighted fears about young Europeans travelling to fight with the Islamic State and al-Qaeda-linked groups in the Middle East before returning to carry out attacks on western targets.

"The group was on the verge of carrying out terrorist attacks to kill police officers in public roads and in police stations," Belgian federal prosecutors' spokesman Eric Van der Sijpt told a news conference about the raids overnight.

Police found Kalashnikov assault rifles, explosives, ammunition and communications equipment, along with police uniforms that could have been used for the terror plot, he said.

Members of the group had recently returned from Syria, prosecutors said, but they said there still appeared to be no direct link to the Paris attacks, reports AFP.

Prime Minister Charles Michel raised Belgium's terror alert to its second highest level after the raids. The European Commission stepped up security at its headquarters in Brussels as a "precaution", a spokeswoman said.

Jewish schools in Brussels and the port city of Antwerp closed yesterday.

The senior European

counterterrorism official told Cruickshank that investigators were working around the clock to learn about the potential attack plans of the returned ISIS fighters.

"This threat is not just about Belgium tonight, but it's also other European countries as well," Cruickshank said.

The Netherlands said yesterday it was not raising its terror threat level, currently at "substantial," the second-highest level.

The European counterterrorism official told Cruickshank that there was also significant concern about Khorasan, an al-Qaeda affiliate group, plotting attacks against Europe.

With France still reeling from the attacks which targeted its cherished traditions of free speech, US Secretary of State John Kerry laid wreaths yesterday at both Charlie Hebdo offices and the Jewish supermarket during a visit to Paris.

Open talks

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The government, he said, has grasped state power with the help of law enforcement agencies which are composed of partisan people. "So the government is reluctant to create a congenial and peaceful atmosphere to hold a free and fair election."

Rizvi demanded an immediate end to the confinement of BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia.

The BNP chief has been confined to her Gulshan office for 13 days. Cops along with water cannon and two police vans are still guarding the office.

Meanwhile, Aminul Islam, a former captain of national football team, met Khaleda last night. Speaking to journalists after the meeting, he said the former prime minister insisted the blockade programme will continue until their demands were met.