

Hajj uncertain for 20,000 pilgrims

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Despite depositing money with private hajj agencies, some 20,000 Bangladeshis are uncertain whether they would be able to perform Hajj in September as they missed the online registration deadline.

The agencies and the aspiring pilgrims demanded the government take measures to ensure they make the pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia. They have already staged several demonstrations in the city to press home the demand.

The Saudi authorities fixed a quota of 1,01,750 Bangladeshi pilgrims this year. Accordingly, the religious affairs ministry in Dhaka introduced an online registration system for them.

As many as 91,908 aspiring pilgrims registered online within the February deadline, but 1,11,012 people deposited money with the agencies con-

cerned, according to the ministry.

Talking to The Daily Star, Religious Affairs Secretary Chowdhury Md Babul Hassan said, "Around 20,000 Bangladeshis have paid money for performing hajj this year, but the Saudi authorities would not allow them to pilgrimage to the Arab country as they didn't register in time."

The ministry has already requested the Saudi authorities to consider granting visas to all the aspiring pilgrims, he added.

The parliamentary standing committee on the religious affairs ministry last week decided to talk to the Saudi authorities to settle this.

NO UMRUAH VISA

The Saudi government in March stopped issuing umrah visas to Bangladeshis without giving any prior notice.

The decision came as some

Bangladeshis reportedly didn't return home after performing the holy ritual, said sources. Some private hajj agencies were allegedly involved in smuggling people into Saudi Arabia using the umrah visa.

Mohammad Ibrahim Bahar, president of the Hajj Agencies Association of Bangladesh, said the government should identify the errant agencies, if there was any, and bring them to book.

Hajj flights to Saudi Arabia are scheduled to start on August 16 and continue until September 18. Return flights are likely to start on September 27 and end on October 28.

Of the Bangladeshi pilgrims, 10,000 will perform hajj under government arrangement and the rest under private management, ministry officials said.

A pilgrim this year paid a minimum of Tk 2,96,206 for performing hajj.

From Satkhira to UK supermarkets

FROM PAGE 1

Development Foundation (Hortex Foundation) have confirmed export of mangoes from Bangladesh for the British supermarket chain, Asda.

Asda, a subsidiary of the American retail company Walmart, is the United Kingdom's second-largest chain by market share.

Asda is procuring the mangoes through one of its subsidiaries - the International Procurement Logistic (IPL) - from Dip International, a Dhaka-based exporter of fresh agro products.

Dip International's Manager Dipok K Das told The Daily Star that they have been catering to ethnic niche markets in the UK but this is for the first time mangoes from Bangladesh are going to enter the European supermarkets.

They're expecting a floor price of 3.7 pound per kilogram for Himsagar (a mango variety) and if things go as envisaged, the total export volume may hit 80 metric tonnes by the end of the current mango season, said Das.

Dr Md Saleh Ahmed, senior value chain expert of the Hortex Foundation, told The Daily Star that in league with FAO, Hortex trained 500 farmers (tomato, brinjal, and potato and mango growers) so that they could know the agricultural best practices and become conscious and judicious about pesticide applications and other food safety aspects.

"A hundred and 80 of them are mango farmers from seven districts having concentrations of mango orchards," he said.

Dr Ahmed added, "First shipment of 500 boxes of mangoes (weighing in

total 625 kilograms) will be exported on Sunday (May 17) and the second consignment of over two metric tonnes of mangoes will be dispatched in the following week. These two, you can say, are trial shipments. Then things will roll faster and on regular basis."

With an annual mango output of around one million metric tonnes, Bangladesh is the 8th largest producer of the juicy fruit in the world.

FAO Representative in Bangladesh, Mike Robson, expressed excitement at the entry of Satkhira mangoes to British supermarkets.

It's coming of age that mangoes from Bangladesh are fulfilling European food standards, said Mike.

Bangladesh's own state-of-the-art food safety laboratory carrying out the pre-export tests is also a testimony that people are becoming more conscious about safe food, said Mike, a British national.

Golam Mostafa is one of the first few farmers in Satkhira from whom the mangoes are being sourced for the first lot of the export consignment.

"I'll provide them five tonnes of Himsagar. These will be of good quality and four to five mangoes would weigh one kilogram. We're selling mangoes in the local market at Tk 55 per kg and hoping to get premium prices from the export market," said Mostafa.

Experts pointed out that though the UK is the destination of over 40 percent of Bangladesh's horticultural export, it has been mainly confined in the low-price ethnic markets as the upstream markets (chain shops) did not allow Bangladeshi fresh products due to non-compliance of market access requirements.

Dip International's Manager Dipok K Das said they're starting with Himsagar but later on they would also export Langra and Amrapali.

With the UN FAO providing support to Hortex Foundation, many farmers and value chain actors got the necessary training on best agricultural practices and with that they started exploring the high value export markets.

In early 2014 the FAO Food Safety Team initiated contact with Asda. Asda was interested in procuring mango from Bangladesh as it was already popular, being sold through the stores of the large Bangladeshi expatriate community in UK. An additional advantage is that some Bangladeshi mango varieties mature early in the season and therefore could be sold to UK consumers before other varieties from competitor countries are made available.

Asda assigned its subsidiary IPL to communicate with FAO and secure safety-assured quality mangoes from Bangladesh.

In the last mango season, Hortex, FAO and the Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE) arranged field visits of UK experts in three mango-growing areas -- Satkhira, Chapainawabganj and Rajshahi -- and made a sample shipment of nine mango varieties to the IPL. Later, Walmart showed interest in importing three varieties -- Himsagar, Langra and Amrapali.

On May 11, mango samples collected from Satkhira groves were sent to the National Food Safety Laboratory at the Institute of Public Health (IPH) and on Thursday the lab gave test results clearing the consignment for export.

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quality in order to achieve the targeted GDP growth.

"There has to be allocation for setting up special economic zones on an urgent basis. Priority has to be given to public-private partnership projects," he said, calling for timely implementation of the projects to avoid cost escalation.

AK Azad, former president of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry, urged the government to withdraw duties on newsprint import and value added tax on the industry, as the sector is struggling to stay afloat.

Salehuddin Ahmed, former governor of Bangladesh Bank, opposed the government's practice to recapitalise loss-making state-run commercial banks at the expense of taxpayers' money. "This is not right. The government should ask them to reduce default loans."

Hossain Khaled, president of Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said the recent political turmoil had inflicted long-term losses on the businesses. "So, the government should exempt value added tax owed

to small businesses for three months of the political turmoil. It will have a positive impact on the businesses."

Aftab UI Islam, president of American Chamber of Commerce in Bangladesh, stressed the need for ensuring investment certainty.

"You can achieve many things through intimidation, not investment. Local investors want certainty. Foreign investors want more certainty," he said.

Former MCCI president Syed Manzur Elahi said there has to be investment in skill development. "We can't industrialise the country without developing a huge pool of human resources."

Shusmita Anis, a director of ACI Limited, said it would take years for firms and companies to recover from the losses incurred during the recent political turmoil. "So, the budget should come up with measures so we can recover the losses."

Nihad Kabir, a member of the MCCI, moderated the discussion. Former MCCI presidents Rokia Afzal Rahman and Latifur Rahman, among others, were present at the discussion.

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Hasina and other close relatives are not talking to reporters for the last two days.

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Salahuddin may face

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Salahuddin told Shillong police that some unidentified men picked him up from an Uttara residence in Dhaka on March 10 and kept him confined somewhere for around months before leaving him in Shillong blindfolded after nearly an overnight's drive.

Indian police arrested him on charges of entering the country without valid documents.

He is currently being treated at Shillong Civil Hospital for heart and kidney problems.

Dr DJ Goswami, who is attending him, yesterday said they found some problem in his blood but did not elaborate.

"There is no possibility of releasing

him from the hospital in the next couple of days. Salahuddin will be released from the hospital when his condition will be stable," he told this newspaper last evening.

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