

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 UMRAH 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 Tk2,96,206 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.

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.

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

Reduce cost of business

FROM PAGE 1

plan Muhith presented was realistic. "The revenue target is not realistic either. The tax net has to be expanded. In some cases, the taxes have to be reduced."

He pointed at the quality of spending under the annual development programme (ADP) as the implementation rate goes up riding squarely on the expenditure in the last two months of every fiscal year.

Ahsan H Mansur, executive director of the Policy Research Institute, said the budget should pay more heed to farmers and workers.

He also requested the government to stand by farmers with financial support so they can stock their rice until the price goes up. "The farmers should not go broke."

On attracting private sector investment, he said: "The Board of Investment has to be made functional. If needed, there has to be a change in its leadership."

Mustafizur Rahman, executive director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue, said there needs an improvement in the rate of investment and its

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 Ul 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.

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.

Meanwhile, BNP leader Abdul Latif Jony met Salahuddin at the prison cell of the hospital on Thursday night.

Talking to the BBC Bangla yesterday, he claimed Salahuddin was not getting proper treatment there. Quoting Salahuddin, he said the BNP leader always took his treatment in Singapore.

The BBC also quoted local police officials that Salahuddin expressed his wish to travel to Songapore for treatment.

Also yesterday, a lawyer from

Guwahati called on Salahuddin at the hospital, said his relatives in Kolkata.

The decision on the legal battle will be made once his wife Hasina Ahmed reaches Shillong, Jony told the BBC.

But she still waiting for an Indian visa, which she expects to get in a couple of days.

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

Meanwhile, Prof Emajuddin Ahmed, former vice-chancellor of Dhaka University, yesterday demanded that the government form a judicial committee to find out who had picked Salahuddin up, kept him confined and pushed him into India.



A relative at DMCH mourns for a woman, who died of electrocution in the capital's Lalbagh yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

JU female student, sister "harassed"

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A female student of Jahangirnagar University and her elder sister were "harassed" after they protested smoking by a Chhatra League activist on a university bus.

The elder sister had gone to the campus to visit the younger one -- a third-year student of commerce faculty -- and they were returning home on the university bus that started from the campus at 5:00pm.

One of the BCL activists was smoking, standing by the seats of the two girls. A row ensued when the elder sister asked him not to smoke it as it was a public place.

The BCL activist changed his position but two of his fellows stood beside her seat.

The female student identified one of the three as Abdul Mazed Shimanto, debate secretary of JU unit BCL.

"I don't know whether it was done intentionally, but he [Shimanto] did push my sister several times," she alleged.

Talking to reporters, she said Shimanto kept talking in a way she found "objectionable".

After they got down from the bus in Dhaka, the BCL activists hurled abusive words and threatened them with dire consequences if they reported the matter to anybody, she alleged.

Contacted, Shimanto said he along with his two friends -- Mohitosh Ray Titu, religious affairs secretary of JU unit BCL, and Sajib Kumar Saha, international affair secretary of Rafiq Jabbar hall BCL -- was going to Dhaka in the bus that day.

He claimed that Titu was smoking standing at the door of the bus.

"Identifying herself a physician, one of the girls wanted to know why we were smoking in a public place," said Shimanto.

He admitted that they had an argument after the bus reached its last stop at Bangabazar in the capital.

"To my knowledge, I did not press or push any girl," said Shimanto, adding, "Even if I had done anything like that, it was unintentional."

The two other accused could not be reached.

Mahmudur Rahman Jony, BCL president of JU unit, said he was informed about the matter and necessary action would be taken.

Shimanto is accused in a case for possessing illegal firearms; Titu was expelled from the university on charges of beating a journalist and Sajib was one of those who attacked a teachers' demonstration against the then vice-chancellor in 2012.

3 daughters

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They would often have fights over this, she said.

Locals were aware of this Gani's illicit relations and the resultant discontent between the couple, and tried to solve it through village arbitration several times.

"But Gani is very arrogant and never obeyed the verdict of arbitration," said local union parishad member Khairul Bashir.

Even three days before the incident, an arbitration was held over the same issue but failed to fetch any solution. After that Fatema started staying at a neighbour's house at night.

This left the three daughters completely at the mercy of their father, Fatema said.

Senior Assistant Superintendent Masud Alam of Cox's Bazar police thinks the murders were cold-blooded as Gani was neither mentally imbalanced nor an addict.

Officer-in-Charge Pravash Chandra Dhar of Chakaria Police Station said no case in this connection was filed till yesterday afternoon. If the family members do not file any case, police will do it of their own, he said.

Female farmers

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palwals (patal), drumsticks, green chillies and onions.

One of the farmers is Razia Khatun of Mostabapur. The 42-year-old said women growers are the sellers at the temporary market near the Hunger Free World Complex and that's why it is now known as Bau Bazar (wives' market).

Prices of vegetables are also very reasonable compared to markets elsewhere in the district. One kilogram of tomatoes was sold at Tk 15, a gourd at Tk 20 and a bundle of green spinach at Tk 10 this week.

Customers were quite happy with what they bought.

"Vegetables sold here are grown using organic compost. That's why I do my shopping at this market," said Ali Hossain of Chottosimla village.

Selina Khatun of Balidapara said as the produce is free from pesticides, "the consumers would not get sick".

The unsold produce is sent to the capital for sale through Praktitik Krishi, a local NGO.

THE IDEA

The idea of organic vegetable farming took shape about six months ago when 30 women farmers from three villages under Neyamatpur union in Kaliganj decided to grow safe vegetables for locals.

They were worried that the villagers' health was being harmed by the high usage of pesticides and chemical fertilisers.

After discussing the idea amongst themselves, the women shared it with the local office of Hunger Free World, a Japan-based NGO.

Assisted by the organisation, the

farmers started cultivating vegetables using only compost and "balainasok" -- a locally-made pesticide.

CHANGING LIVES

Owner of one acre of arable land, Juthi Begum of Mallikpur village said she can now earn around Tk 40,000 a month and run her family smoothly.

Her three children were happy that their financial troubles were over and they can continue WITH their academic studies.

Monowara Begum of Mostabapur has been producing three vegetable crops round the year on her 10 decimal of land.

"I didn't look out for relief materials from the union parishad chairman or other government officials. I am self-reliant now."

At present, around 600 women from three union parishads produce chemical-free vegetables in the area, said Hafizur Rahman, coordinator at the local office Hunger Free World.

Insecticides are dangerous to human and environmental health. They can cause damage to the kidney and the liver of humans, said Altab Hossain, the upazila health administrator at Kaliganj.

The women farmers' success has made men aware of the harmful effects of pesticides.

Lauding organic farming, Sazedul Haque Liton, chairman Neyamatpur Union Parishad, said the move would encourage more farmers to grow poison-free vegetables.

Growers hoped their success would inspire others to produce safe food without damaging the environment.

900 survive

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In his first public comments on the issue, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak said he was "very concerned with the plight of migrants" but gave no indication of a policy shift on an issue that has caused regional finger-pointing.

"We are in contact with all relevant parties, with whom we share the desire to find a solution to this crisis," he said in a statement, without elaborating.

It was not clear whether those "relevant parties" included Myanmar, which faces harsh criticism of its treatment of Rohingya and on Friday snubbed neighbouring Thailand's call for a regional meeting on the problem on May 29.

The unfolding humanitarian crisis appears to have been precipitated by a Thai police crackdown that has thrown busy people-smuggling routes into chaos just as a surge of migrants has taken to the sea.

"We are unlikely to attend... we do not accept it if they (Thailand) are inviting us just to ease the pressure they are facing," Myanmar presidential office director Zaw Htay told AFP.

THE RESCUE

Indonesian police said an overloaded boat with 787 people was sinking off the coast when local fishermen came to the rescue, picking up migrants as they jumped from the stricken vessel.

Muhammad Amin, a Rohingya, told AFP that the boat had first been turned back by the Indonesian navy towards Malaysian waters, only for the Malaysian navy to direct it back towards Indonesia.

In an increasingly desperate situation -- after nearly two months at sea and the crew having abandoned ship - he said the Bangladeshis attacked the Rohingya and threw some of them overboard, and he was forced to swim for hours before being rescued.

"As we were swimming, we saw a fishing boat, and we cried for help,

then fishermen pulled us one by one from the sea," said the 35-year-old.

Search and rescue officials said it was not immediately clear whether all those rescued had come from the same boat.

At least 61 children were ferried to shore by Indonesian fishermen. Nearly 600 migrants were already sheltering in Aceh after managing to get ashore in recent days.

A military spokesman said earlier the navy had prevented a boat carrying migrants from entering Indonesian waters but he later clarified that the boat had been empty, and the navy found migrants in the water nearby and helped them to shore.

Earlier Friday, a boat carrying about 300 Rohingya left Thailand's waters, a Thai official said, after authorities repaired its engine and provided food.

A Thai official said the passengers - who wanted to reach Malaysia -- declined offers to come ashore in Thailand, fearing they would be sent back to Myanmar.

They planned instead to make for Indonesia, the official said.

The Muslim Rohingya flee by the thousands each year to escape state-sanctioned discrimination in Buddhist-majority Myanmar and recent sectarian violence against them.

There are more than a million Rohingya living in Myanmar's western state of Rakhine, many going back generations, but Myanmar insists they are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

The Bangladeshis are thought mainly to be economic migrants escaping their country's grinding poverty.

Ctg mayor

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Upazila Chairman Ehsanul Haidar Chowdhury Babul and Central Sramik League leader Safar Ali were present at the meeting.