

'Wheat blast' threatens yield

Farmers in 6 districts complain of infection

AMANUR AMAN, back from Meherpur

Wheat blast disease has become a serious threat to grain quality and yield, incurring losses to the farmers in six southwestern districts.

Scientists and specialists after laboratory tests claimed that this is the first time in Bangladesh in which the seasonal crop got infected with this disease.

Officials at the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) and Wheat Research Centre (WRC) of the Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute said they have examined samples from the fields and confirmed that the disease is a blast infection.

They identified the fungus that might have grown due to unexpected temperature fluctuation and several days of continuous rain in the first week of February.

Experts also have tested the seeds used to be sure of the infection, the officials said.

The affected districts include Kushtia, Meherpur, Chuadanga, Jhenidah, Jessore, and Magura.

DAE officials, who visited the affected fields, said Meherpur was the badly hit. Around 2,000 hectares of wheat fields had been damaged by the fungus.

According to farmers, they have marked yellow and black spots on the leaves and sheaves of wheat. After a few days, the spots got larger and spread over the entire plant.

At one stage, both the sheaves and flowers turned yellow and white, and finally the plant dried up without producing any grain.

Mustafizur Rahman, deputy director of Meherpur DAE, said farmers started informing them about the matter from mid-February.

"We told the higher authorities about the problem after visiting the fields," he said.

A team, led by Paritosh Kumar Malaker, chief scientific officer of Wheat Research Centre in Dinaipur,

visited the affected fields in Meherpur, Chuadanga, and Jhenidah on Wednesday.

"We have made pathogen tests using the diagnostic technique, called 'field pathogenomics', and confirmed the symptoms of the disease," he said.

He said, "As it [disease] is the first infection in Bangladesh, we need to be more careful."

Farmers and DAE officials said the areas experienced rain in the first week of February. After five to seven days, farmers observed spots on wheat leaves and sheaves.

This correspondent visited Garadoba, Saharabati, Dhankhola, Bamundi of Gangni upazila, and Khoksa, Chandbeel, Madandanga in Meherpur Sadar upazila and found a large number of affected fields.

Farmers Ripon and Mawla Boksh of Madandanga told this correspondent that they jointly cultivated wheat on five bigahs of land. About half of the crop was damaged. They have to incur a huge loss, they said.

Sources at the DAE divisional office in Jessore said farmers in the six southwestern districts cultivated wheat on around 58,135 hectares. Some 16,710 hectares are in Kushtia, 10,320 hectares in Jhenidah, 7,020 hectares in Magura, 5,810 hectares in Chuadanga, 4,400 hectares in Jessore and 13,875 hectares in Meherpur.

Mustafizur Rahman, deputy director of Meherpur DAE, said they were holding meetings with the farmers and distributing leaflets to create awareness among the farmers.

The DAE office also advised the farmers to spray Nativo and Folico on the affected fields.

He primarily estimated that 5 percent of the total production might be affected.

However, Chief Scientific Officer of WRC Paritosh Kumar said wheat production would decrease by around 10-40 percent.



A farmer showing wheat sheaves infected with wheat blast disease. After being infected with the disease, the crop's flowers turn yellow and white and the plants dry up without producing any grain. The photo was taken at Gangni in Meherpur yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

Asia Cup over for Mustafizur

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issue till the afternoon even though several online portals reported the news of Mustafizur's injury quoting unnamed sources.

The fact that Tamim Iqbal, who became a father on Sunday and was on leave, returned to the country by yesterday noon and went to the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur straight away to attend a training session, added further intrigue.

When asked about his sudden return, Tamim said: "When I filled up the application for leave I had informed the board that I would catch the next available flight back after the birth of my child. My son and my wife were under observation for 24 hours and I arrived immediately after that period."

It was only later in the evening that all the speculations were cleared with the BCB media committee chairman, Jalal Yunus providing an on-record statement.

"Mustafizur did suffer from a side strain and he has been asked to rest for two weeks. The tournament's technical committee has approved the management's request to replace Mustafizur with Tamim. It has been finalised," Yunus told The Daily Star.

"Mustafizur is definitely a key bowler within Bangladesh ranks. He has been getting plenty of wickets. However, his injury hasn't caused any tension within the management at all. It's part and parcel of the game. The good thing is that we have a good bowling line-up and all of the bowlers are in form," he added.

With Bangladesh due to play their first World Cup game against the Netherlands on March 9 in Dharamsala, the two-week hiatus could cause some problems with regards to Mustafizur's participation in that game.

When asked about the issue, Yunus said: "I am sure the team

management will work with him with an aim of making him recover before the World Cup. That won't be an issue."

It wasn't possible to reach Mustafizur yesterday due to the hush-hush scenario, however, his family members ascertained that the bowler was not at all tensed and was in a good mood. According to them, the doctor had asked the left-arm to rest for ten days.

Mustafizur's absence will no doubt be a big loss for the hosts as far as the Asia Cup is concerned. With 43 wickets in the three formats since 2015, he has been Bangladesh's leading wicket-taker. He has also been the go-to bowler in the ongoing tournament.

This is Mustafizur's second injury in two months. He was earlier sidelined with a shoulder injury during the Zimbabwe series in January and as a result was not allowed to take part in the Pakistan Super League.

SC cautions

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damage the public faith on the judiciary.

Chief Justice SK Sinha told Fakhru's lawyer Zainul Abedin that everybody must abide by the judiciary if they want to follow the constitution.

Fakhru on February 7 told a public meeting in Sylhet that the government was trying to control the judiciary.

On February 18, the SC asked Fakhru to explain his comment.

In his explanation, Fakhru said he did not make the comment to undermine the judiciary, his lawyer Sagir Hossain told The Daily Star.

The apex court has meanwhile extended Fakhru's bail for 15 days in three cases filed in connection with arson and vandalism.

A five-member bench of the Appellate Division headed by the CJ passed the order after disposing of three petitions filed by Fakhru seeking extension of his bail in the cases.

The High Court on November 24 last year granted bail to Fakhru for three months in connection with the cases.

Keeping media out, trial on



Dismissed Rab official Tareque Sayeed Mohammad, one of the key accused in Narayanganj seven-murder case, being taken to a Narayanganj court yesterday. The court was supposed to start a hearing on the case on February 25, but it was deferred as police could not produce Tarek on that day.

PHOTO: STAR

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floating in the Shitalakkhya a few days later.

The District and Sessions Judge's Court of Narayanganj on February 8 this

year, framed charges against 35 people, including Nur Hossain and three sacked Rab officials, in two cases filed over the murders. Of the 35, 12 are still on the run.

Nazrul's father-in-law Shahidul Islam alleged that Rab personnel abducted and killed Nazrul after taking Tk 6 crore from ward councillor Nur Hossain for the contract killing.

Yesterday, 23 accused including Nur Hossain and the three sacked Rab officials -- Tareque Sayeed, Arif Hossain and Masud Rana -- were produced before the court amid tight security.

Around 10:45am, Judge Syed Enayet Hossain started recording deposition of Bijoy Kumar Paul, the complainant in one of the two cases and son-in-law of Chandan Sarker.

A few minutes before the judge took his seat, PP Wajed Ali Khokon said that as per a court directive, none but the complainants, accused, their lawyers and court officials concerned could be present at the courtroom.

Khokon Saha, a lawyer for accused Nur Hossain and general secretary of Narayanganj city Awami League, also echoed the same.

Then, as asked by police, all the journalists present there had to leave.

Shakhawat Hossain, the victims' lawyer in both cases, told The Daily Star that the court did not give any such directive.

WHAT EXPERTS SAY

Former Law Minister Shafique Ahmed said the trial in the seven-murder case was a public trial, not a camera trial.

"Only the court concerned can take

any decision prohibiting newsman for security reasons. None other than the court can prohibit reporters from covering any trial proceedings," he told The Daily Star.

Eminent jurist Shahdeen Malik said, "It is a constitutional mandate that trials are open ... that is to say all interested parties shall have access to the courtroom during trial."

A few laws such as Family Court Ordinance-1985 and Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000 provide for certain exceptions for holding trial behind closed doors.

"The exception of trial behind closed doors can only be ordered by the judge of the court concerned. Hence it doesn't seem to me that the public prosecutor of a court has any authority to exclude anyone including journalists from a courtroom," he said.

"Besides, this is a trial in which the whole nation has an interest and journalists can convey the nation about the development of the trial," he added.

'WE ARE CONCERNED' Shahidul Islam, father-in-law of victim Nazrul Islam, said: "We are concerned over getting justice after the journalists were driven out."

He alleged that a group of government lawyers and lawyers of the accused were trying to "taint the case" and "play hide and seek".

Shahidul, also a witness in the other case, said he too had to leave the court-

room.

Selina Islam, wife of Nazrul and complainant of a case, said driving out journalists was an ominous sign and in the absence of the vigilance of journalists, the lawyers of the accused can divert the case.

She hoped the court will allow the media during the trial proceedings and the people will get information about it through newsmen.

Mizanur Rahman Ripon, brother of one of the seven victims Moniruzzaman Swapan, demanded the trial be held in the presence of media.

Victims' counsel Shakhawat Hossain, also former president of Narayanganj District Bar Association, said the media played a vital role to unearth the secret of the killings and to expedite the movement for justice. "The cases came to this stage due to a pivotal role of the media," he added.

He alleged that the public prosecutor and the lawyers of the accused took the strategy to drive out the journalists from the courtroom so that their ill-attempts to influence the trial do not come to light.

"We have full confidence in the court but we are concerned over getting justice because of different types of ill-attempts made by the defence," said Shakhawat, adding that he was even personally receiving pressure on differ-

ent occasions.

Terming the incident "unfortunate", Afzal Hossain, general secretary of Narayanganj District Journalist Union, said journalists never faced problems in covering court proceedings.

But things had changed after Nur Hossain was repatriated from India, he said.

Afzal added the court should look into the matter to ensure transparency in the trial.

YESTERDAY'S PROCEEDINGS

The court recorded the testimony of Bijoy Kumar Paul. Lawyers representing 22 accused, among them 12 fugitives, cross-examined him before adjourning the case proceedings until March 7, when defence counsel of Nur Hossain and others will cross-examine him.

After the proceedings, Bijoy told reporters that his father-in-law Chandan Sarker and his driver were abducted from Dhaka-Narayanganj Link Road area. Their bodies were dumped in Shitalakkhya River after killing them.

He filed the case against unnamed people and the police, after investigation, submitted charge sheet against 35 people and as a complainant, he gave his testimony and prayed for justice.

The court also fixed March 3 for recording testimony in another case filed in this connection.

Finally, Leo grabs the statuette

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four decades with eight nominations, followed by Richard Burton seven, and Glenn Close six.

All the internet chatter was maybe because Leonardo's first nomination came 23 years ago, for a heart-wrenching portrayal of developmentally disabled teenager Arnie Grape; maybe his stellar rise to stardom with Titanic that made him the quintessential global heartthrob of the late 90s; or maybe because he belted out one memorable performance after another. Maybe it was a combination of all.

Leonardo's conscious pursuit for greatness began with the biographical crime drama Catch Me If You Can. Under Steven Spielberg's direction, his portrayal of millionaire teenage conman Frank Abagnale Jr showed the world what he could do. The same year, 2002, he met Martin Scorsese, the director he would go on to form one of

greatest director-actor partnership, and the two joined forces for Gangs of New York. Two years later came another memorable biopic from the duo, The Aviator, of the eccentric filmmaker and aviation pioneer Howard Hughes. His second acting nomination came, first as best actor, but no win.

The momentum was building. In 2006, his role in Blood Diamond as a diamond smuggler and as an undercover state trooper in Scorsese's The Departed saw him get double nominations as best actor in Golden Globes and Screen Actors' Guild Awards, and a third Oscar nod for Blood Diamond, but no award.

After three rather quiet years (when he worked in Body of Lies and Revolutionary Road), Leonardo's genius burst through again in 2010, with two incredible performances: Scorsese's Shutter Island and

Christopher Nolan's mind-boggling Inception. The entire world was baffled that he got no big awards. Leo wasn't.

He kept pushing. In 2012, he gave another unnervingly brilliant performance in Quentin Tarantino's Django Unchained as the antagonist, and mixed it up with Baz Luhrmann's epic romantic drama The Great Gatsby in the titular character. The next year, Leonardo gave one of the best performances of his life as Jordan Belfort in Scorsese's The Wolf of Wall Street. It earned him his first Oscar nod as a producer. A new category, but the same luck.

Possibly the biggest reason fans went bonkers over his snubs was because they felt he was trying everything to win that one accolade: unbelievable acting, working with the biggest directors, and the range he showed on screen. His real life felt like a script

for an Oscar-worthy film.

But for 2015's The Revenant, he pulled out all the stops. With last year's triple-Oscar winner Alejandro G. Iñárritu, he became 19th-century frontiersman Hugh Glass in an epic quest for survival and revenge. He dived in frozen waters, slept inside a horse carcass, ate raw bison liver, and got mauled by a bear.

On stage at the Dolby theatre in Hollywood, Leonardo's eyes gleamed but his voice remained steady. And he delivered the speech that looked straight out of an incredible biopic of a legendary actor. He spoke about climate change and the world's urgency to react to it.

"Let us not take this planet for granted. I do not take tonight for granted," he closed.

(More coverage of the academy awards on Arts & Entertainment page-9)

NBR staff went on one-hour strike

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Revenue officials across the country went on a strike for an hour yesterday, protesting the government's failure to nab the culprits who assaulted two of their senior colleagues at Benapole land port on February 17.

The government could have earned Tk 81 crore if the strike from 12:00 noon to 1:00pm was not observed, according to officials of the National Board of Revenue (NBR).

"We were forced to go on strike as the law enforcers failed to arrest the culprits even 12 days after the incident," a senior NBR official told The Daily Star, requesting anonymity.

NBR Chairman Nojibur Rahman, however, said: "It is not the issue of the NBR entirely; it is the issue of the customs department."

Shahidul Islam, general secretary of

BCS Customs & VAT Association, said: "We observed the work abstention to demand safe working environment, and the arrest and trial of the attackers."

On February 17, export-import activities came to a halt at the Benapole land port following assaults on the port's customs house Joint Commissioner Mustafizur Rahman allegedly by the activists of the Bangladesh Chhatra League, the student wing of the ruling Awami League.

Deputy Commissioner Nitish Chandra was also assaulted while trying to save his boss.

Mustafizur filed a case with Benapole land port police station against six people, including the general secretary of BCL's Sharsha upazila unit, and 22 others in connection with the incident. Of the accused, two have so far been arrested.