

Pumpkins a blessing for Teesta char farmers

S DILIP ROY, Lalmonirhat

Farmers in three Lalmonirhat upazilas are pleased with a bumper pumpkin crop grown on uninhabited chars of the Teesta River. This profitable cultivation has the potential to significantly improve the lot of the impoverished local farmers.

able and high profit encouraged many others to participate, they added. Farmer Rasul Miah, 50, of Rajpur village in Lalmonirhat Sadar, said a farmer needs to spend only Tk 1,400 to Tk 1,500 to cultivate pumpkin on one bigha, and can harvest 450 to 500 pumpkins. Each pumpkin weighs around 5kg to 8 kg and 1kg is sold for about Tk 9 in the local market during the harvest period, but sells for up to Tk 25 during the off season, he added. "I cultivated pumpkin on six bighas this year. I have been harvesting the produce from Sunday, and am hoping to earn over Tk 1 lakh," said farmer Nabiul Islam,

55, of Kalmati village. Farmer Sirajul Islam, 50, of Char Gobodhan village in Aditmari upazila, said pumpkin cultivation started in the first week of December and harvesting started from the first week of March. "We don't need huge capital to cultivate pumpkin on char land. A little investment brings high profits. It needs only seeds, some compost fertiliser and proper care," he added. "Miles of chars in the Teesta River were declared unfit for farming any crop some years ago," said farmer Delowar Hossain, 65, of Char Khuniyagachh village in Lalmonirhat Sadar. "Now we know how to use the char lands to produce crops, so

we have been cultivating pumpkin for the last six years," he added. Safayet Hossain, deputy director of Lalmonirhat DAE, said char farmers are given training on producing pumpkins and other crops. "Pumpkin cultivation on chars is playing a vital role in mitigating poverty among Teesta River char dwellers," he said, adding that wastage from pumpkins can fertilise the sandy land for cultivating other crops. Char farmers urged the government to provide necessary support, including seeds, fertilisers and insecticides for cultivating pumpkins, which can play a vital poverty alleviation role.



PHOTO: STAR

Pumpkin sees good yield in the sandy lands of Teesta River basin areas of Lalmonirhat Sadar upazila this season. The photo was taken from Char Kalmati in the upazila a few days ago.

MOULVIBAZAR, PATUAKHALI

Criminals destroy 2000 betel, 4000 melon plants

STAR COUNTRY DESK

Criminals cut over 2,000 betel plants at a Khasi village in Baralekha upazila under the district while 4,000 water melon plants were destroyed by spraying weed killer medicine at a field in Kalapara upazila under Patuakhali district on Monday night. Our Moulvibazar Correspondent reports: A gang cut over 2,000 betel plants at Gandhai Punjee, a village inhabited by Khasi people in Baralekha upazila under the district. Seventy to eighty people attacked Gandhai punjee

and cut the betel plants (10 to 15 feet in height) there on Monday night, locals told this correspondent during his visit to the spot yesterday. "An unidentified gang demanded Tk 5 lakh from me over mobile on February 27. I didn't meet the demand and possibly the gang cut the betel plants worth Tk 20 lakh," said Rajesh Posna, headman of Gandhai Punjee. "We demand arrest and punishment of the people involved in the heinous act," he said. Father Joseph Gomes, central committee member of Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon, condemned the

act. The betel gardens are the only source of income of the Khasi people, he said. Md Moniruzzaman, officer in charge of Barlekha Police Station, said they will take legal action against the culprits after investigation. Our Patuakhali Correspondent adds: Criminals destroyed over 4,000 watermelon plants in five bighas of land by spraying weed killer medicine on a field of Krisnapur village under Kalapara upazila in the district. The plants with thousands of fruits are dying as they sprayed weed killer medicine at night, said

Motaleb Munshi, owner of the water melon field. "This season I spent over Tk one lakh to cultivate watermelon and the fruit was growing well. Only after three weeks, I would earn minimum Tk 3 lakh by selling the popular fruit. But enemies have done great loss to me," said a tearful Motaleb. "I recently filed a case accusing a few neighbours over a land dispute. They might have committed the crime," he said. Mizanur Rahman, sub assistant agriculture officer, confirmed that the watermelon plants were destroyed by spraying weed killer medicine.



PHOTO: STAR

Plants with nearly mature watermelons are dying as criminals sprayed weed killing medicine at this field of Krisnapur village in Kalapara upazila under Patuakhali district, and right, alleged extortionists cut off around 2,000 betel plants at Gandhai Punjee Khasi village in Baralekha upazila under Moulvibazar district on Monday night.

Man killed over land dispute

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Noakhali

A man was killed over land dispute at Kotra Mahbbatpur village under Begumganj upazila in Noakhali yesterday morning. The victim was identified as Mominullah, 52, son of late Nurul Haque of the village. Officer-in-Charge Golam Farooq of Begumganj Model Police Station said Mominullah and his younger brother Habibullah locked in an altercation over the ownership of a piece of land at around 9:00am. At one stage, Habibullah hit Mominullah on the head with a stick. He died on the spot. Habibullah went into hiding soon after the incident.

On information, police went to the spot, recovered the body and sent it to Noakhali General Hospital for autopsy. Two held with pistol

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Pabna

Members of Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) arrested two alleged arms peddlers with a foreign made pistol and a magazine from Pabna bus terminal area in the town on Tuesday night. The arrestees are Md Robel, 27, son of Md Abul Kashem of Johirpur village, and Md Kawsar Hasan, 28, son of Abdul Kader of Rajapur village in Sadar upazila. On secret information, the elite force raided the area and arrested the two with the firearm around 10:30pm, said an official of Rab-12. The two were produced in a court that sent them to jail yesterday, he said.



PHOTO: STAR

Like many others, these farm labourers of Dinajpur leave for other districts in search of work for better wages. The trend, causing shortage of workers in the famous rice producing region, affects agriculture works including nursing of growing plants.

DINAJPUR

Shortage of labourers affects Irri-Boro farming

KONGKON KARMAKER, Dinajpur

Nursing of freshly planted Irri-Boro fields is badly affected due to acute shortage of farm workers in the district. Paddy growers need labourers for removing weeds from their paddy field and spraying fertiliser there, farmers said, adding that 60 to 70 labourers are needed for each hectare of land. A similar problem arose during the sowing period that began early January and ended recently, said Subal Roy, a farmer of Tegra village in Biral upazila of Dinajpur. At least 1.76 lakh 651 hectares of land have been brought under Irri-Boro cultivation in Dinajpur this

year. The production target is 5.5 lakh tonnes of rice. Earlier a large number of labourers used to come to the district from other places for seasonal jobs during the paddy sowing and harvesting season but now labourers of Dinajpur are going to other districts to earn higher wages, farmers said. "I get Tk 300 a day by working as a farm labourer in Dinajpur but if I work in other areas like Rajshahi, I can earn Tk 500 a day," said Md Rustam Mia of Bhaduria village in Choraghat upazila under the distant. Amid the shortage of labourers, paddy farmers are worried about possible production fall as lack of timely nursing of the plants can lead to low yields.

"I have hired a group of labourers for nursing my land, but they have agreed to work only at intervals," said Sukur Ali, who cultivated paddy on six acres of land at Shibrampur village in Chirbandar upazila of Dinajpur. Big farmers are somehow managing labourers by offering high wages, but small farmers cannot afford it, as they earlier incurred losses in paddy cultivation for the second consecutive season, said Sukur Ali. "It is almost impossible to take care of the paddy fields without labourers. The situation may lead to serious problem for us," Amar Kumar of Khayerpur in Phulbari upazila said in a tone of frustration.

Poor children's horses make rich children smile

KONGKON KARMAKER with ANDREW EAGLE

There are fairground rides, exhibit stalls and snack stands to discover. High-spirited loudspeaker announcements and flashing party lights make the trade and industry fair organised by Dinajpur's chamber of commerce enough to excite any child. Held on the iconic field, Gor-e-Shahid Boro Math of Dinajpur town, for many children a highlight of visiting the fair is the chance to ride a horse nearby. Ishtiaq Ahmed, 7, of Suihari in the town is accompanied by his father Shamim Ahmed. He is lucky, fulfilling his wish to enjoy a horse ride early that evening. But the experience leaves him with questions about the boy leading the horse. "Does he go to school?" Ishtiaq asks his father. "Don't his parents wish him home before sunset?" Without answering the father takes the son's hand and leads him away. It's a basic truth which makes little sense to children: stations in life differ. For the nine-year-old boy, Rose, who's in charge of the horse, rides are never a matter of amusement. They're about livelihood. "I took the horse riding profession," says Rose, from Dinajpur Sadar upazila's Gabura village. He says his father Shamsur Rahman is a tractor driver who doesn't care for the four-member family well. He says he's brought his horse beside the fairground in the hope of earning money, pocket change from the parents of each middle class child who takes a ride. Holding the horse's rope he stands, waiting for more customers, most often children of around his own age. The other children sit on horseback while cameras click; Rose watches them



PHOTO: STAR

Eleven-year-old Iqbal is in charge of these horse and cart, which he uses to earn money by selling rides. The use of children horse handlers to sell rides to other children is an unfortunate trend in Dinajpur.

laugh and smile. He does this every day, travelling back and forth from his village eight kilometres away. "I leave home at 10:00am," he says, "I try to return home as early as I can but it's never before 10:00 pm." "Usually I earn up to Tk 200 per day," says Rose, "On a good day I can make as much as Tk 400." For each ride Tk 5 is pushed into Rose's palm. He's been making money with his horse for about a year. "While all children wish to enjoy a carefree childhood," observes Golam Mostafa, a Dinajpur resident visiting the fair, "this boy has to labour with his horse to entertain the children from solvent families." Rose says he stopped attending school two years ago because his parents were unwilling to send him. Like that of any working child his life is difficult; and days

spent in the company of a horse are hardly days without risk. Yet he is one of many. From Kuakata beach in Patuakhali to Dinajpur, across Bangladesh it's not uncommon for children work as horse handlers. Iqbal is another boy with the same job. The 11-year-old says he took the reins of the horses-with-cart he uses to entertain other children from his father. Observed grazing his horses in a Dinajpur field, Iqbal looks exhausted; too tired even to seek out customers. Many children his age, he says, are forced to participate in horse races as well. Despite laws to prevent child labour it is everywhere, to be found in one form or another. But according to Md. Mobarak Hossain, programme officer of Plan Bangladesh posted in Dinajpur's Khansamsa upazila, using children as horse handlers

doesn't have a long history in the district. "As the trend would seem to be in initial stages here," Hossain says, "It's a good time for government officials to address the issue." "There will be no solution until employing children causes fear," says Dinajpur lawmaker Iqbalur Rahim, referring to the need for strict penalties for those employing minors. "Childhood for every child should be about completing school and enjoying themselves," he continues, "As education is free in Bangladesh, all parents should encourage their children to go to school." He promised to look into the issue the next time he's in Dinajpur. In the meantime it might be as well that Ishtiaq's father doesn't attempt to reply to his son's queries, because as yet there aren't any satisfactory answers to be had.