

IMPORTED PICTURE BOOKS
Colours to fade, sadden kids

IPS/UPS
Want backup power? Cough up more

WASHING MACHINE
Cleaning clothes to get costlier

TOILETRIES
Time to pamper yourself

LUBRICANT
Rev up your engines

LED LIGHTS
Light up your world

Farm output rises despite wafer-thin slice off budget

Rice import duty hike to give cushion to local growers

REAZ AHMAD

If statistics provided in the finance minister's budget speech are something to go by, the country's food grain production has increased by two million tonnes since 2012-13.

However, budgetary allocation for the agriculture sector during the same period got shrunken to less than half, in terms of the percentage of allocation the agriculture ministry received from the national budget.

The thin slice of agricultural allocation in the jumbo budget cake is only getting thinner year by year.

According to AMA Muhith's budget speech at parliament yesterday, farmers grew over 37 million tonnes of food grain in 2012-13. Four years down the line, the production is projected at 39 million tonnes in the outgoing fiscal year, with the prospect of further growth in FY 2016-17.

But the government's budgetary allocation for agriculture ministry dwindled from a good 8.50 percent of the total outlay in 2012-13 to 4.21 in the revised budget of the current fiscal. And yesterday, the finance

minister proposed only 4.01 percent allocation for the agriculture ministry.

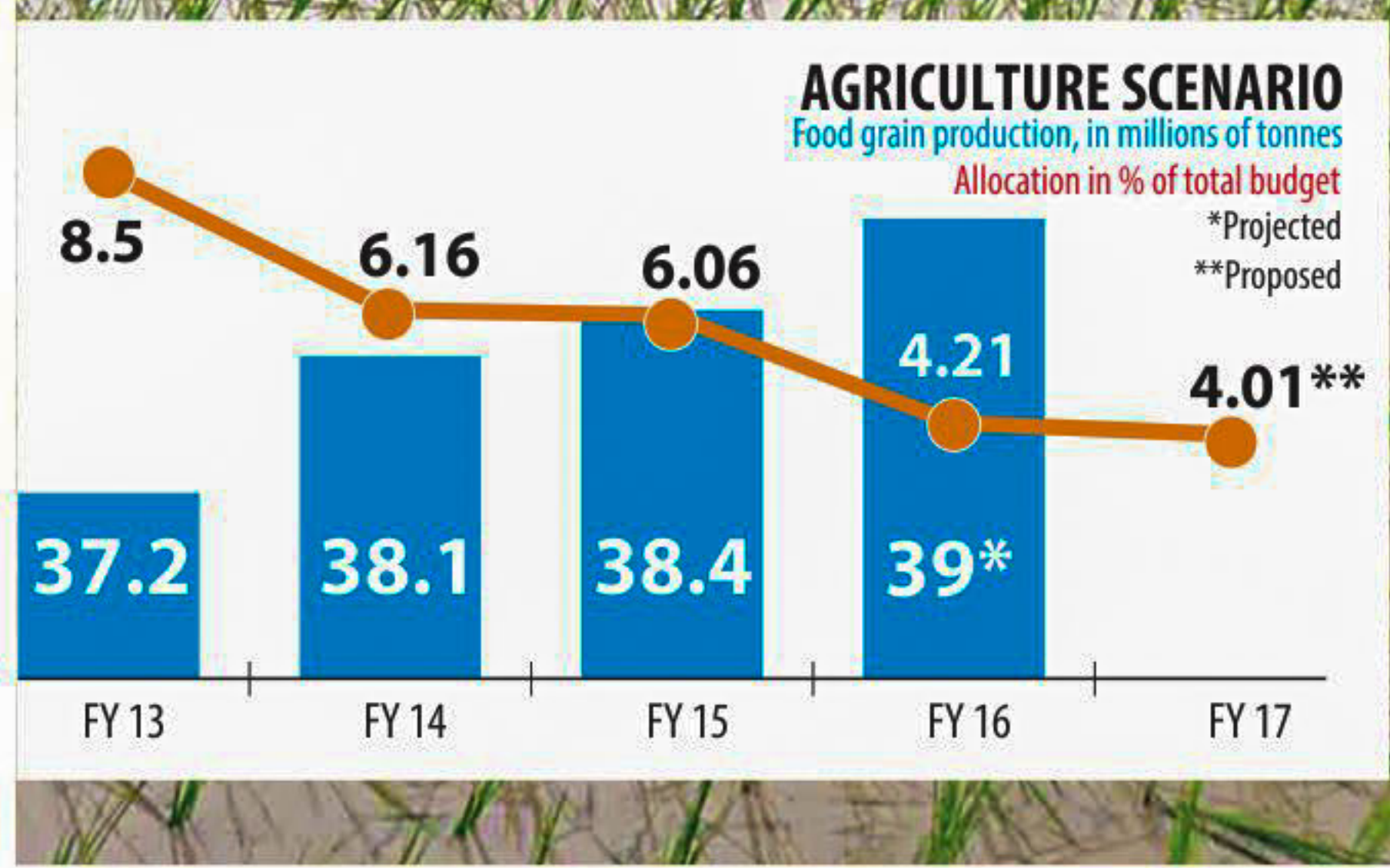
The government also proposed to keep aside Tk 9,000 crore as subsidy, something it consistently did over the past few years despite fall in fertiliser prices in the international markets.

Experts, however, note that government needs to invest more and devise measures so that farmers don't stop cultivating paddy because of continuous slump in its prices.

As an apparent and immediate bailout measure, the finance minister proposed to slap a 25 percent customs duty, in place of the current 10 percent, on rice import. This would cushion local growers against cheaper imports from India.

Dr M Asaduzzaman, a professorial fellow at the country's premier think-tank Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (Bids), holds a different opinion though.

"Hiking duty, protecting local rice growers - this is all good. But timing is equally important here. Those who were up for making quick money through cheap rice



Tk 200 crore for upkeep of Hindu temples

TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY

For the first time in the country's history, a block allocation of Tk 200 crore has been proposed for the maintenance of temples and holy places of the Hindu community.

Finance Minister AMA Muhith made the proposal while presenting budget for the 2016-17 fiscal year yesterday.

The allocation came amid the spate of attacks on the minority communities in different parts of the country in recent times. Besides, there are allegations that the government was discriminating against minorities while allocating budget to the religious affairs ministry.

Minority leaders welcomed the government's move. They also urged the government to allocate similar funds to other minority communities.

"The state of religious harmony existing in Bangladesh is a matter of pride," Muhith said.

There are around 24,000 temples in the country. Of them, 5,500 temples run child education programmes, and "their state of maintenance is comparatively better due to that", he said, adding that the rest require repairs and maintenance.

With the help of a "meagre income" of the Hindu Welfare Trust, some degree of maintenance work for other temples is being carried out, the finance minister said.

Besides, there is a need for extending physical infrastructural facilities of Langalbandh of Narayanganj, a holy place for Hindu pilgrims at home and abroad, he added.

Infrastructure projects to get \$5.7b unspent foreign funds

Aims govt

MD FAZLUZ RAHMAN

The government has set a target of using \$5.7 billion or Tk 44,463 crore from the unspent foreign aid in the pipeline in the next fiscal year, nearly double that of the outgoing fiscal year, to bankroll some key infrastructure projects.

It seeks to increase utilisation of foreign aid to reduce dependency on costly domestic borrowing, Finance Minister AMA Muhith said.

The money will be used in large projects such as Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant, Karnaphuli tunnel and Padma bridge rail link.

The utilisation rate for foreign aid is fairly low. Every year, most of the funds remained unused due to poor implementation. Inefficiency, excessive bureaucracy and abrupt changes of project directors

SEE PAGE 7 COL 4

'Uncertain' local governance holding back progress

Says Muhith, outlines plans to improve situation but keeps mum on bureaucracy, police

SHAKHAWAT LITON

AMA Muhith yesterday said the poor state of local governance remains a major impediment to good governance in the country.

He, however, spoke little about the current state of affairs in the public and police administrations. He also fell short of outlining significant proposals to improve the country's overall governance system.

He has been speaking for the last eight years for decentralisation of power by strengthening the local government system to speed up economic growth.

Like yesterday, he made some pledges in this regard in all his previous budget speeches since 2009.

Even his party the Awami League ahead of the parliamentary elections in 2008 and 2014 had vowed to strengthen union, upazila and district councils through decentralisation of power.

But all the promises remain unful-

filled due to lack of the government's political will.

Moreover, the electoral process has largely been damaged in last two years due to violence and widespread irregularities, including capturing of polling stations and stuffing of ballot boxes.

The controversial elections raised the question as to how people elected through unlawful means would contribute to improve local governance.

Transaction of huge amount of money during the ongoing union parishad polls over picking party candidates might result in further spread of corruption in local governance, according to governance analysts.

In such a ground reality, the finance minister spoke for devolution of power.

His argument for devolution, a strong form of decentralisation of power, is significant.

In terms of size and population, as Muhith said, any district of Bangladesh

is bigger than 50 to 60 countries in the world.

"It would be difficult to infuse dynamism in development initiatives to achieve 10 percent GDP growth unless an enabling environment is created by devolving power," he stated in his budget speech styled "Marching towards Growth Development and Equitable Society".

Muhith first spoke up for devolution of state power last year to make local government institutions effective. But he didn't explain the mode of devolution.

There is a devolution model in the UK. Its parliament enacted separate laws to devolve state powers to Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, keeping provisions for a government and a parliament for each of them with some exclusive jurisdictions.

In the present context, reforms in local government system are critically important, he said adding, the powers

SEE PAGE 7 COL 1

The capital to get 142-storey tower by 2018

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government yesterday revealed a plan to construct the 142-storey Iconic Tower with an international convention centre and a modern sports complex in the proposed Purbachal Metropolis.

The dream project, which would be built under a public-private partnership, is expected to be complete by 2018.

"The main auditorium of the convention centre will accommodate 5,000 people, while the main stadium of the sports complex will have a seating capacity of 50,000 spectators," Finance Minister AMA Muhith said in his budget speech yesterday.

Once implemented, the project will facilitate trade and commerce and also create jobs opportunities, he said.

The project will need 70 acres of land, and necessary allocations will be made for the proposed project.

Land services to go digital in all upazilas by 2020

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government has said land-related services in all upazilas will be digitised by 2020.

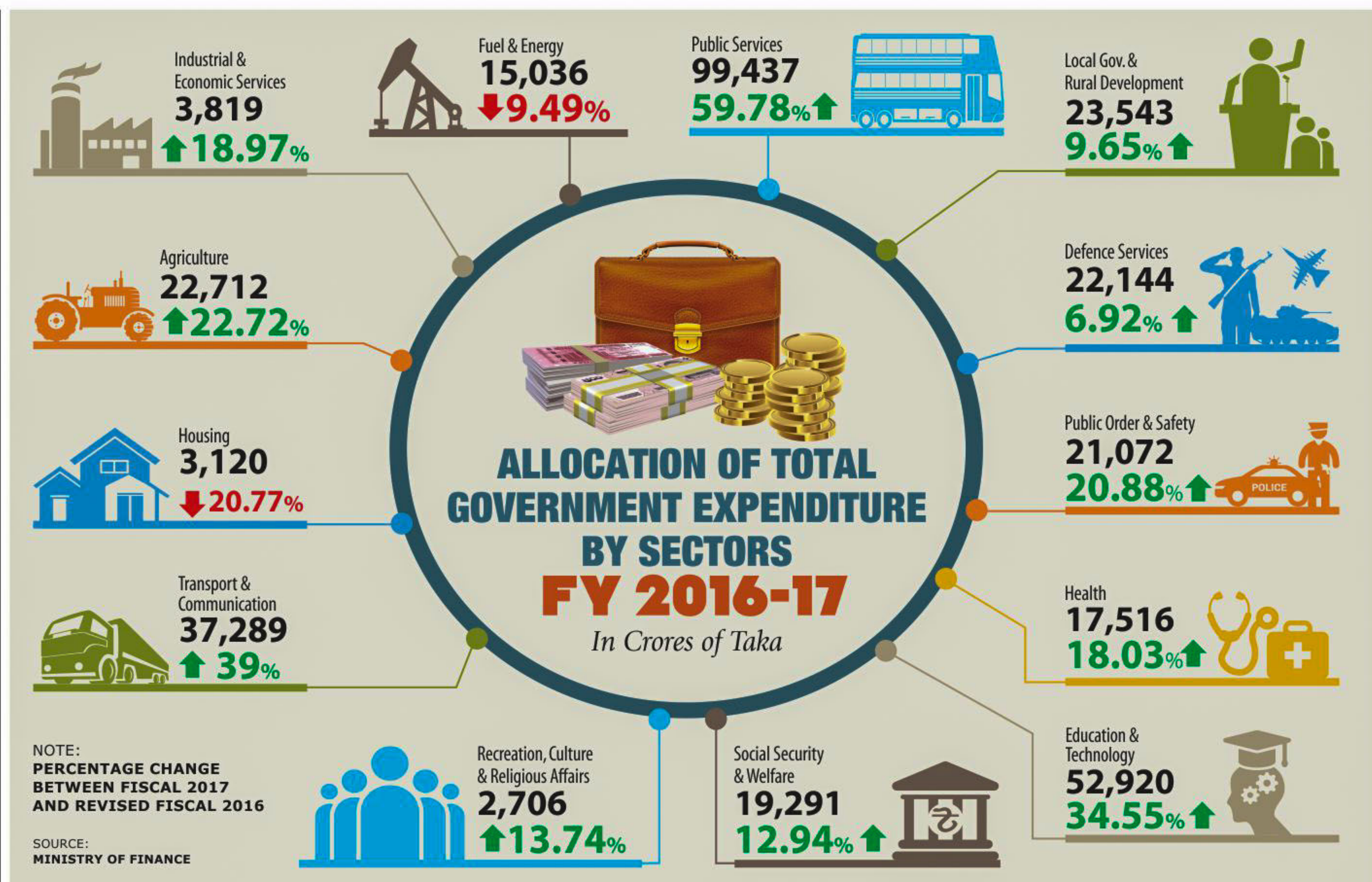
It has already taken an initiative to keep existing khatiyans (land records) of 55 districts in a digital system to facilitate land survey and ease record keeping.

Preparations for making digital maps and khatiyans in 53 moujas of Dhaka and Narsingdi districts were also underway, said Finance Minister AMA Muhith during his budget speech yesterday.

He said a digital land management system has been in place in 45 upazilas of seven districts. Efforts were also taken to set up land information services centres in 20 upazilas.

The minister hoped that three of the service centres would be established by this September.

Besides, land ownership certificate in lieu of existing



Only Tk 58cr for nutrition of 6 crore kids

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Only Tk 58 crore has been allocated for over six crore children of the country under the National Nutrition Services programme in the proposed budget, says a finance ministry report on the outlay.

The report analysed expenditures of seven ministries and observed that despite the country's success in a number of health indicators, including reduction of child and maternal mortalities, low weight of children due to malnutrition remains a big challenge.

Again, the report said the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare would be spending 24.78 percent of its allocation of Tk 175.16 billion for children-related activities.

In the last fiscal year, the ministry's expenditure on the same issue was 26.16 percent of its Tk 148.41 billion budget.

The report said 2.65 crore of over 6 crore children, who form 37.9 percent of the total population of the country, live below the

SEE PAGE 13 COL 1