

Boiler blast kills one, injures 3 in Dinajpur

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

A man was killed and three others, including a woman, suffered burn as a boiler in a paddy husking mill exploded when they were warming themselves near the large stove of the mill in Dinajpur Sadar upazila on Monday.

The deceased was identified as Gulzar Hossain, 35, son of Khokan Uddin of Raniganj village in the upazila.

The burn victims are Nur Islam, 25, son of Rustam Ali, Anowara Begum, 35, daughter of Amzad Hossain, and Rafiqul Islam, 45, son of Khabir Sheikh, all of the same village.

Chairman of Fazilpur Union Parishad Sirajul Islam said the victims were warming themselves near the stove when the boiler exploded, leaving them badly burnt.

Locals rushed them to Dinajpur Medical College Hospital. Gulzar was referred to Rangpur Medical College Hospital where he died.

Train kills elderly woman

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Jamalpur

An unidentified woman, aged about 65, was crushed to death under the wheels of a train near Sarishabari railway station in the district on Tuesday.

A Dhaka-bound Agnibina Express from Tarakandi hit the woman when she was walking along the rail tracks around 6:00pm, said Nasirul Islam, OC of Jamalpur Railway Police Station.

Being informed, they recovered the body and sent it to Jamalpur General Hospital morgue for autopsy, the OC said.



Staff of the regional office of Bangladesh Agriculture Research Institute (BARI) in Lebukhali area of Patuakhali nurture some hydroponic watermelons on the office premises on Tuesday. Inset, an employee holds two slices of a watermelon.

PHOTO: STAR.

Hydroponic watermelon farming on show in Patuakhali

SOHRAB HOSSAIN with ANDREW EAGLE

In Patuakhali the days of having a 'watermelon season' may be numbered. The introduction of hydroponics, growing watermelons without soil, relying instead on nutrient-rich water solution delivered by pipes to nurture the plants, promises ripe watermelons year-round. Moreover, hydroponics brings the garden out of the field. Hydroponics is suitable for any available space, such as rooftops.

The technique is being intro-

duced to farmers by the regional office of Bangladesh Agriculture Research Institute (BARI) in Lebukhali area of the district. Several months ago officials constructed a 200-square-foot demonstration plot in their office compound with 140 holes in its pipe network suitable for watermelon seeds. Now, with watermelons hanging on every vine, it's time for harvest.

"The life cycle of a watermelon vine is only two and a half months," says BARI laboratory assistant Md. Bellal Hossain. "We

have already harvested 100 watermelons, with 30 more ripening."

"Initially, producing watermelons with hydroponics is more expensive, but thereafter the cost reduces since the pipe network is in place," he explains. "The demonstration plot cost us about Tk 3,000 to set up; but this harvest should fetch over Tk 10,000 in the market. It is profitable."

The watermelons are fed with a liquid mixture containing essential minerals such as potassium, calcium, magnesium, manganese, copper and zinc, as well as

hydrogen phosphate and boric acid. "With these dissolved elements the water solution is spread to the plants through the pipes regularly," Bellal says. "It's the main food for the melons."

"We have already succeeded in our hydroponics demonstration," says Md Mostafizur Rahman Talukder, a chief scientist at BARI, "From next January we plan to make a plot on a larger scale. This way of growing watermelons promises to be low cost and good business."

"It's environmentally friendly

agriculture," he adds. "The produce is organic and hydroponic farms can be situated in yards and on rooftops." According to the scientist, hydroponically grown watermelons require no pesticides or irrigation.

Among local farmers, the BARI demonstration has already generated interest. "I came here to see the technology, how to cultivate watermelons year-round," says Abdus Sobahan Akon, a farmer from nearby Badorpur village. "The experts have assured me they will provide assistance so I intend to try this kind of farming."

Research to boost fisheries

SHYKH SERAJ

Since the independence of Bangladesh, we have adopted silver carp, mirror carp, grass carp and big head carp fish with our climate and environment and later spread those across the country. However, in course of time, the taste declined. Then came katla, rui and mrigel fish varieties that saw successful breeding and rapid spread at farm level. Then arrived the catfish, first of the variety of it was African Magur. This variety helped the fish farmers but also it was in many aspects harmful for the fisheries sector. Although, for protein scarcity, many fish farmers were interested to go for it. Afterwards, pungas (farm cultivation starting in 1994) came and it's still very popular, in terms of price and flesh. In massive scale, later came Tilapia and so many others. Now, Bangladesh stands fourth in freshwater fish production in the world. Although Comilla was the leading fish producing region of our country, later fish farming spread in Mymensingh, Jessore and now it has gone across the country.

Fisheries Research Institute (FRI) and the Department of Fisheries have a great deal of contribution behind this, undoubtedly.

Dear readers, as you know Mymensingh is regarded as the forerunner of 'silver revolution' in our country. I have been to Mymensingh many times during the past four decades to boost up the promises in the fisheries sector. I frequently travelled to Bangladesh Agricultural University, especially its Fisheries Faculty and also FRI. In the early 80s, fish farming had spread so extensively that even vast areas of paddy lands turned into fish cultivation ponds. You would also be able to recall my TV campaign on fish farming in ponds adjacent to households, titled Hakim Ali's Fish Farm. And, I must not forget the great contributions of some legends who brought dramatic change in the fisheries sector - from FRI, Dr MA Majid, Dr MG Hossain, Dr MV Gupta, Dr VRP Sinha, Dr HM Kohinor, Dr Md Akhteruzzaman, and last but not the least, Dr Yahya Mahmud who was then the scientific officer and now the DG of the

same institute. For the fish farming extension, Prof Dr Muhammad Anwarul Islam and Prof Dr Fazlul Alam Molla from Bangladesh Agricultural University had a big role too. Many other researchers and research organisations had great contribution behind the development of fisheries sector. The extension was huge. On both sides of the highway from Trishal, there were plenty of fish farms.

Despite our great success in fish production in the global perspective, how well we can sustain this performance remains a vital question.

While government research brought success for fish farmers, they also became innovative to go

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onward with new creative approaches. Fish farmers also did breeding of many fish varieties and started farming in their own ponds.

As time flew by, hatchery owners became so much self-reliant that they became reluctant to take the help of government research outcomes and kept on experimenting a lot by themselves.

However, dear readers, you may also recollect a disaster that was seen couple of years back, the invasion of omnivorous fish, piranha - a consequence of such experiments carried out without caution.

This write-up also comes from a shift in gears of fish farming. Just a few days back, farmers were making good profits from Vietnamese koi fish. Before that Thai koi (farming introduced in 2003) and some other varieties were making profit. But now there is an overall price collapse in the market and farmers are losing



PHOTO: HRIDOYE MATI O MANUSH

interest to rear these fishes. They are now more keen to cultivate pabda and gulsha. Although gulsha's breeding was done by FRI, it didn't see much progress in the past due to other popular fish varieties.

"Although some farmers are farming Vietnamese koi, they're not getting the minimum reasonable price for it.

"In that case, tilapia price should have gone up, but that didn't happen as the overall price for the fish has gone down, says Nurul Haque, an experienced fish farmer from Mymensingh.

"People are now more keen to buy pabda and gulsha," he added.

A fish farmer, who used to get 15 tonnes of Vietnamese koi from one acre of land, now gets three tonnes of Pabda. Pabda farming started back in 2001. Shing fish also had a major stake in the market for couple of years. But due to a severe disease outbreak, farming of Shing declined massively.

Still tilapia and punga are there and have demand in the market. But, for how long one variety will continue taking over the other? And, why can't these popular varieties sustain -- that is a big question.

"However, tilapia's performance also declined this year," informs Nurul Haque.

"So, what's the solution at close to revive the fisheries sector?" I asked Nurul Haque, a nationally awarded progressive fish farmer of our country.

"The export market needs to be

opened," Nurul replied.

"There are issues with compliance," I reminded him.

"We have all preparations for it and ready to fulfil all conditions," said a confident Nurul Haque.

He also suggested that farmers should get quality and subsidised feed. Through the restless campaign in Farmers' Voices in Budget, a yearly farmers' dialogue-based programme of Hridoye Mati O Manush, I raised the issue of reducing land development tax and the government has finally did it. But, fish farmers need the electricity bills to be reduced too.

In Germany, I have seen the researchers recommend to the farmers only those crops/fruits that will give them better produce. And they do it with an in-depth knowledge on climate variability.

Dear readers, the breeding at the hatchery level through private initiatives succeeded many a times but most of those failed after some short-term quick profit. I strongly believe that a coordinated research by the government authorities will help sustainable development in the fish production. Last but not the least, I hope the government research will be strengthened even more so that the fish farmers across the country get the real benefit out of it and take fisheries sector even further. Furthermore, research through public-private partnership can augment the country's fisheries sector.

People feel the chill

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Thakurgaon

People of Thakurgaon and Panchagarh are experiencing the first cold wave of the season, which is causing untold sufferings to the poor.

The bone-chilling cold spell with fog and biting wind for the last several days has disrupted normal life.

As the people were compelled to stay indoors due to the chilly weather, business was hampered while the attendance in schools and colleges reduced, said locals.

A number of patients, especially elders and children, thronged hospitals in the districts with cold-related diseases, including pneumonia and cold diarrhoea.

The lowest temperature was recorded in Thakurgaon at 9 degrees Celsius while the temperature at Panchagarh was 13 degrees yesterday, according to met officials.

The sun remained invisible almost all

day long for the last several days.

A large number of people gathered at makeshift and roadside markets to purchase second-hand warm clothes though the prices have almost doubled in last few days, said local people.

Cold-stricken poor people of different villages in the districts are suffering a lot due to lack of warm clothes.

Although different government and non-governmental organisations are distributing warm clothes among the poor, it is too inadequate for the demand.

Deputy Commissioner of Thakurgaon Abdul Awal said the district administration has already distributed 12,677 blankets among the cold-stricken poor people in five upazilas.

Meanwhile, Panchagarh DC Amal Krisna Mandal said they have already distributed 9,835 blankets among the poor people.

At least 11,575 blankets will be distributed within a week in the district, he said.

BNP to press for

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"If we find the president sincere, we would talk about absence of democracy, law and order, repression and filing of false cases against opposition men, apart from formation of the Election Commission," added the leader.

BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia has already tasked some senior party leaders with making a recommendation to her about potential members of the search committee and the party's strategy and issues for the December 18 talks.

Khaleda on Tuesday night had a closed-door meeting with some senior party leaders at her Gulshan office.

"We need to hold another two to three meetings to finalise our strategy for the talks," BNP standing committee member Moudud Ahmed told this newspaper yesterday.

Another standing committee member, who was present in Tuesday night's meeting, said their dialogue with the president would be based on the BNP chief's proposal on formation of the EC.

Khaleda at a press conference in the capital on November 18 had placed a proposal for constituting the new EC.

Meanwhile, the BNP is scheduled to send the names of its 10 delegation members to the president by today.

The president on Monday invited five registered political parties to discuss formation of the new EC as the tenure of the incumbent commission would expire in February next year.

The president will hold talks with the Jatiya Party on December 20, and Liberal Democratic Party, a component of the BNP-led 20-party alliance, and Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Janata League on December 21.

Forty political parties are registered with the EC. The registration of Jamaat-e-Islami was scrapped in line with a High Court verdict.

JSD WANTS REVISED RESCHEDULE
The Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) yesterday sent a letter to the president for fixing a fresh schedule for its meeting with him, citing unavailability of its chief on December 22.

JSD General Secretary Shirin Akhter said party chief Hasanul Huq Inu would be staying abroad on that day to attend an OIC programme.

The JSD will submit proposals to the president for setting up a strong and dynamic EC, she told The Daily Star.

ECONOMIC ZONE

Tea workers fear eviction

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Moulvibazar

Workers of four tea gardens held various programmes on Tuesday marking one year of their protests against setting up of an economic zone in Chunarughat upazila of Habiganj.

The gardens are Chandpur Tea Estate, Ramganga Tea Estate, Begumkhan Tea Estate and Jual Bhangra Tea Garden.

Tea workers are one of the most marginalised and disadvantaged groups in Bangladesh. They live in small, thatched-roofed mud houses where they are allowed to stay as long as a family member is working.

Atit Bakti, 54, head of a five-member family, said they will starve without assistance from the government and other benevolent people if the economic zone is set up.

A registered worker gets a meagre Tk 85 as a daily minimum wage, which ranks among the lowest in the world, said Sadhon Santal, president of Chandpur tea garden unit of Tea Labour Union.

President of Bangladesh Tea Workers Women's Forum Gita Rani Kanu alleged that the government is using political influence to fulfill its target. "We have helped tea workers to resist the move, but the wind is stronger on the other side," she added.

The government's attempt to set up an economic zone is just another case of discrimination against tea workers, said Nripen Paul, general secretary of Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union, Lashkarpur valley.

"We have been living and cultivating on the land for over 150 years, but still we don't have a place of our own," he added.

Central member of Bangladesh Adivasi Forum Swapan Santal, and a resident of the area, said many family members of workers don't have jobs on the tea estate, so they survive by growing crops on spare land within the estate.