

Gladioli offer brightness to Savar growers

AKLAKUR RAHMAN AKASH with ANDREW EAGLE

While jasmine or gardenia flowers, among others, are said to help one sleep, the gladiolus is more renowned for its visual beauty. But in Savar's Birulia union, 32-year-old Nur-e-Alam has found in gladioli the secret to a good night's rest: solvency.

"I couldn't sleep due to poverty," says Alam, "but now that I am economically self-reliant, I have no insomnia." Nowadays a successful flower farmer, Alam has reason to feel content.

His first experience with growing gladioli dates back to 2012, when he leased 1 bigha of land on which to try growing the flower. He earned 50,000 taka for his efforts in the first year. This year he hopes to earn up to six lakhs from selling the flowers cultivated on 8 bighas of leased land.

"Flower production costs around Tk 1 lakh per bigha in pesticides and labour," he says. "Around 25,000 seeds worth Tk 50,000 are needed as well. But I have found that gladioli cultivation is more profitable than other flowers."

Gladioli can be grown and har-

vested within 70 days in any season, with different coloured specimens including white, red, yellow, scarlet, pink, violet, rose pink, lipstick and blue often grown side by side in the same plot.

With his savings Alam has purchased a utility truck to transport the flowers to market. He has diversified into growing roses on three bighas of leased land as well as vegetables including papaya, pumpkin, cauliflower and spinach on ten bighas. Crop diversification has helped Alam to secure a dependable, year-round income.

Nonetheless it is Alam's success with gladioli that has most impressed his neighbours. "We often visit Alam's gladiolus field both to enjoy its beauty and to take his advice about growing them," says farmer Nitay Chondro, who has recently begun growing gladioli of his own.

According to Lokman Hossen, a rose grower in the area, gladioli cultivation is increasingly popular. "Considering profit margins, many have decided to grown gladioli instead of roses," he says.

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Nur-e-Alam and three workers plucking gladiolus flowers in his field at Shyampur village of Savar on the outskirts of the capital recently. *Inset*, Nur-e-Alam with his flowers. PHOTO: STAR

ROHINGYA ISSUE Myanmar delegation in Dhaka to talk

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

A three-member Myanmar delegation from the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State arrived in Dhaka yesterday to discuss the Rohingya issue with Bangladesh authorities.

The members of the delegation are Win Mra, chair of the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission; Aye Lwin, core member and founder of Religious for Peace Myanmar; and Ghassan Salame, former Lebanese minister of culture and also special advisor to the UN secretary-general, said foreign ministry sources.

The delegation is expected to hold talks with the Bangladesh foreign minister and high officials of the government and international organisations during their four-day stay.

The Myanmar government established the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, also known as Rakhine Commission, to discover lasting solutions to complex and delicate issues in the Rakhine state.

The delegation is expected to visit two Rohingya shelters in Cox's Bazar today to see the situation of 65,000 Rohingya refugees who entered Bangladesh recently and joined thousands of others who had done the same years ago.

The Rohingyas from Myanmar took shelter in these shelters to escape a "counter-insurgency operation" in the country by its military.

Apart from talking to the Rohingya refugees in the shelters, the three-member team will hold talks with the local administration and representatives of different international organisations in Cox's Bazar to discuss enduring solutions to the longstanding issues in Rakhine state of Myanmar, sources said.

New trouble on anti-terror front

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will not question their entry," he added.

Another official said any such IS operative would not sit idle after entering Bangladesh. He or she would definitely try to recruit people and carry out attacks using experience in battlegrounds.

In May 2015, a Bangladesh-origin British family of 12 fled to the self-proclaimed caliphate of IS in Syria through Turkey after a month's stay in Bangladesh.

They released a statement on July 4, 2015 confirming that they indeed entered Syria to join IS, according to the UK-based The Independent.

The family, from Luton, including a

75-year-old patriarch and a baby of one, said in the statement that "we are in the Islamic State" and "we feel safer than we have ever felt before".

They had not been seen since May 17, having flown to their homeland of Bangladesh on April 10 and then to Istanbul in Turkey on May 11 -- prompting Bedfordshire Police to launch an appeal to trace them.

About the Bangladeshis who don't have dual citizenship and left the country to join IS, Monirul Islam, also an additional commissioner of DMP, said they will not be able to enter Bangladesh undetected since officials have info about them.

He said around 20 such Bangladeshis went to Iraq and Syria to

join IS. Some of them have already been killed and a few have returned.

One such returnee is Sohan, sources in the CITT said.

The Rapid Action Battalion had earlier said it arrested Gazi Kamrus Salam alias Sohan, an electric engineer, along with four other suspected militants in the capital in August last year.

Officials of another law enforcement agency, who interrogated Sohan in a case after his arrest, said he claimed to have gone to Syria but decided to return as he did not like the IS activities.

He was caught trying to cross the barbed-wire fence on the border by Turkish army and was handed over to police in May 2015. Three days later, he

was sent back to Dhaka, sources quoted Sohan as saying during interrogation.

Others suspected to be in Syria include Junnun Sikder, a student of a top private university; Nazibullah Ansari, a marine engineer; and Mohammad Basharuazzaman, a private jobholder.

Besides, a five-member family of Rokonuddin, a paediatrician at a government hospital in the capital, is also suspected to be in Syria now.

Earlier, Bangladeshi youth Ashequr Rahman, son of an army colonel who died in the Palkhona mutiny in 2009, was reportedly killed in a battlefield in Syria. He is named Abu Jandal Al Bangalee in Dabiq, a propaganda magazine of IS.

'Friendly' JS in the doldrums

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According to article 72(1) of the constitution, there can be maximum 60 days' gap between the end of a session and the beginning of the next one. Like other parliaments formed since 1991, the current Jatiya Sangsad also followed this constitutional provision properly.

One positive side of the current parliament is bringing an end to pervasive culture of House boycott by the main opposition MPs. Jatiya Party lawmakers attended all the sittings of the current parliament over the last three years.

But the other side of this positive development is not bright. The JP could not emerge as an effective main opposition party in parliament. It is mainly because of its three MPs who were inducted into the cabinet and its chief who was made a special envoy to the prime minister with the status of a minister, according to political analysts.

The main opposition MPs never cast votes against any of the government's bills in the last three years. Neither did they question the activities

of the treasury bench. For this, the role of the main opposition has been lauded by the government high-ups on several times.

On many occasions, they echoed the same views of the ruling party MPs and refrained from criticising the government.

Both the treasury and opposition bench MPs together launched verbal attacks on BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia and her party despite their absence in parliament.

For the first time since 1991, the BNP chief and her party were out of parliament. This happened as the BNP boycotted the January 5, 2014, parliamentary election.

In the current session, both the treasury and opposition MPs have been blasting the media for their reports on wrongdoings by some MPs.

Thanks to the "friendly opposition", the government emerged more powerful as it had full control over the legislators.

In such a parliament, MPs seem to have lost their interest in parliamentary businesses. They were supposed to play effective overseeing roles in the

committees alongside in the plenary session.

But after three years, the committee system, a vital parliamentary mechanism to hold the government accountable to the House for its activities, became almost ineffective.

According to the rules of procedure, each of the committee on the ministries was supposed to hold at least 30 meetings in the last three years. But only a few committees held required number of meetings.

The committee on law ministry held 33 meetings, planning 30 and child and women affairs ministry 30 meetings in the last three years, according to information of the parliament secretariat.

Some committees held half of the required meetings. The committee on home ministry held only 14 meetings, the committee on foreign ministry 10, labour and employment 13, science and technology 12 and the committee on local government ministry held only 14 meetings.

Parliament held general discussions around a dozen times in the last three years, according to records of the par-

liament secretariat.

Of them, five were for congratulating Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. The House held general discussions twice to congratulate her for achieving the "South South Cooperation Visionary Award" and the "Champions of the Earth" award.

On two other occasions, the House thanked Hasina after Bangladesh was ranked by the World Bank as a middle income country, and for the rise of popularity of her government and the AL, according to a survey conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI).

It also thanked the Indian people and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi for the passage of the Land Boundary Bill in their parliament.

The House, however, did not hold any discussion on adjournment motions placed by two independent MPs -- Rustam Ali Farazi and Haji Mohammad Selim -- on different national issues, including alleged financial anomalies in climate change fund, gas crisis, killing people by hurling petrol bombs, etc, according to information from the parliament secretariat.

Muslim comics

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For years, "The Big Brown Comedy Hour" has been a regular feature at Comic Strip Live. But this Sunday night was different. The inauguration was days away, and some of the comedians, many of whom were Muslim and of Middle Eastern or South Asian descent, expressed deep uneasiness about Trump's impending presidency. The evening's event was dubbed "The Last Show Before Trump Departs Us."

LAUGHING TO KEEP FROM CRYING "People need to laugh," Obeidallah said, "if only to keep from crying."

This is not an amusing time to be a Muslim in America. Hate crimes against Muslims spiked during the last two years, with attacks on Muslims and mosques rising to a high not seen since the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

Meanwhile, Trump has regularly stoked suspicion about Islam, pushing fake stories about Muslims in New Jersey celebrating on 9/11, re-telling tall tales about an American general killing Muslims with bullets dipped in pig's blood, saying "Islam hates us," and proposing a temporary ban on Muslim immigration to the United States and a registry to monitor Muslims already here.

Trump has said such measures are necessary to defend the United States against terrorist attacks. He has denied that he is anti-Muslim, saying he has "many friends who are Muslim." **A NEW MISSION FOR COMICS** But as Trump begins his presidency, many of the "Big Brown" comedians said that his unorthodox policies and outsized personality have not only given them new material, but a new mission.

"I don't get to talk about my cat Beyonce anymore," said Maysoun Zayid, one of the comics who drew large laughs for castigating Trump this Sunday night. "This is much more pressing. I am genuinely terrified about women's rights, disability rights and especially people of color's rights in Trump's America."

Zayid, a Palestinian-American perhaps best known for her funny and uplifting TED Talk about living with cerebral palsy, said her act has turned darker since November 9.

'We don't want them here'

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the current level of 110,000, writes CNN.

"I am establishing new vetting measures to keep radical Islamic terrorists out of the United States of America," Trump said during the signing after the swearing-in of Defence Secretary James Mattis. "We don't want them here."

He added, "We want to ensure that we are not admitting into our country the very threats our soldiers are fighting overseas. We only want to admit those into our country who will support our country and love deeply our people."

Trump's decree suspends the entire US refugee resettlement programme for at least 120 days while tough vetting rules are established.

These new protocols will "ensure that those approved for refugee admission do not pose a threat to the security and welfare of the United States."

In addition, it specifically bars Syrian refugees from the United States indefinitely, or until the president himself decides that they no longer pose a threat.

Meanwhile, no visas will be issued for 90 days to migrants or visitors from the seven countries: Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen, reports AFP.

In reaction to the order, the United Nations yesterday urged the US to continue its "strong leadership role and long tradition of protecting those fleeing conflict and persecution."

In a joint statement the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, and the International Organisation for Migration said they believed "refugees should receive equal treatment for protection and assistance, and opportunities for resettlement, regardless of their religion, nationality or race."

France and Germany are "concerned" over a number of decisions by Trump, particularly his move to restrict refugee arrivals, French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault said yesterday.

"Welcoming refugees who are fleeing war is part of our duty," he said following a meeting with his new German counterpart, Sigmar Gabriel.

Thousands of leading academics, alarmed by an executive order signed by Trump on Friday afternoon instituting "extreme vetting" of refugees, have signed onto a petition denouncing his action.

By Friday evening, 11 Nobel laureates and thousands of other academics -- many well-known scholars, including Fields medalists, John Bates Clark medalists, members of the National Academy of Sciences and at least one MacArthur Fellow -- had signed on. By early yesterday, a 12th Nobel laureate had joined the list.

They were getting about 10 emails a minute, and 15 to 20 volunteers were working to add signatures, an organiser of the effort said Friday evening, according to Washington Post.

Students are horrified at the prospect of not being able to get back to

their US universities if they return to their home country, said Emery Berger, a professor in the College of Information and Computer Sciences at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

"I'm sure it will send really promising star students across the border to Canada or elsewhere," Berger said. The order comes just as many US universities are offering admission to overseas students for the next academic year. He said an administrator told him Friday to get admissions offers to top Iranian students "yesterday."

A spokesman for the European Commission said it had "no comment to make" on Trump's move.

But he recalled "comments made several times by" European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, that Europe is and remains open to all those who flee armed conflicts and terror, whatever their religion.

In an interview with the Christian Broadcasting Network earlier Friday, Trump was asked whether he would prioritise persecuted Christians in the Middle East for admission as refugees, and he replied, "Yes."

"They've been horribly treated," he said. "Do you know if you were a Christian in Syria it was impossible, at least very tough, to get into the United States? If you were a Muslim you could come in, but if you were a Christian it was almost impossible. And the reason that was so unfair -- everybody was

persecuted, in all fairness -- but they were chopping off the heads of everybody, but more so the Christians. And I thought it was very, very unfair."

"So we are going to help them."

Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war and the rise of the Islamic State, many more Muslims than Christians have been killed or displaced because of the violence. A 2015 Washington Post poll found that 78 percent of Americans favoured equal consideration for refugees regardless of religion.

The order also included a new policy that states and localities should have a say in determining whether refugees can resettle there. It calls for the secretary of homeland security to propose a way to make their involvement routine.

Governors and mayors, mostly Republicans, have objected to refugees, once they are admitted to the country, being resettled in their jurisdictions, often in small and medium-size cities where the cost of living is lower than it is in big coastal cities.

The downsizing of the refugee programme, which had grown under the Obama administration, fulfils Trump's campaign pledge to start the "extreme vetting" of immigrants and refugees, even though the United States already conducts the most rigorous and drawn-out screening process in the world.

Syrians are subject to special attention because the Islamic State controls

significant amounts of territory in their country. An estimated 11 million Syrians have fled their homes since the outbreak of fighting in 2011, with almost 5 million registered as refugees and more than 6 million internally displaced.

US vetting has changed significantly since the refugee programme was suspended for several months after the attacks of Sept 11, 2001.

After applicants register with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, that agency refers some of the most vulnerable to the United States. They include single mothers and their children, victims of violence and people with severe medical conditions requiring sophisticated treatment. Last year, the UNHCR referred more than 34,000 applicants, up from 16,000 in 2015 and 10,000 the year before that.

Syrians being considered for resettlement in the United States pass through a complex, multitiered background investigation. It involves biometric and database screening, personal interviews to look for inconsistencies in their stories, and security screenings by the National Counterterrorism Centre, the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security and the State Department.

The process typically takes nine months to two years to complete.

In the fiscal year that ended in October, the United States admitted 12,500 Syrian refugees. An additional 3,500 were admitted for resettlement

in the last three months of 2016. The overwhelming majority were women and children.

Now, with Trump's executive order, the flow grinds to an immediate halt. People who have sold their belongings in preparation for an imminent departure may not be allowed to board their flights to the United States. It was not immediately clear what would happen to those refugees already in the air when the order was signed.

Google yesterday recalled travelling staff members to the US after the executive order from Trump. It has told the BBC it is concerned about the order and any measures which could block great talent from the US.

The new restrictions will have a major impact on technology companies that hire skilled staff from all over the world on special H1-B visas.

There have already been reports of "green card" holders, who are allowed to work in the US, being prevented from getting on flights. However, green cards are not specifically mentioned in the executive order.

Refugee advocates slammed the order as cruel, while proponents of tighter immigration controls said it would protect Americans from radical Islamists who might try to sneak into the United States as refugees and launch an attack.

But skeptics of current vetting procedures question how effective they can be for refugees from a war-torn country such as Syria.