



Farmers take their livestock to market on a boat in Haluarghat of Sunamganj. They are selling off their livestock, inset, at throwaway prices due to a severe fodder and feed crisis in the area caused by early floods.

PHOTO: MINTU DESHWARA



# Another blow to haor farmers

## Fodder crisis forces them to sell cattle

MINTU DESHWARA, back from Tahirpur

Unusually early flash floods late last month in Sunamganj's haor region not only damaged vast tracts of Boro just a month prior to harvest but also submerged many pastures, leading to a dearth of fodder and prompting many to let go of their cattle.

Take the case of Tahirpur upazila's Mobrul Hosain.

He lost paddy on two acres of land with the onrush of hilly waters and excessive rains, leaving him with only one alternate livelihood - selling the 10-12 litres of milk each of his three cows produce daily.

Unable to manage grass, Mobrul has now opted to sell those at a nearby weekly rural market or "haat".

"The pastures are submerged," the grim-faced farmer tells this correspondent there recently.

Others of his Anandapur village, namely Kutub Ali, Rahim Miah, Kaiyum and Runa Begum, had the

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same tale to tell.

The sufferings in the 11 upazilas do not end with losses in Boro cultivation and difficulties in rearing livestock.

Man and animal are both facing a scarcity of food and drinkable water, as this correspondent learned talking to them.

Bashir Ahmed of Mathgaon village bought two cows on a loan three months ago, hoping to earn some extra money selling milk during Ramadan.

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INT'L CONFERENCE ON AUTISM

# Hasina, Saima show the way

BSS, Thimphu

It was a unique example of demonstrating leadership by both mother and daughter as Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her daughter Saima Wazed Hossain, a strong advocate of autism, were at the helm of a global event at the Bhutanese capital yesterday.

This incident took place in Thimphu as Hasina chaired while Saima Wazed moderated the same function on autism.

The high-level discussion was held on the occasion of the three-day "International Conference on Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disorders" that began at the Royal Banquet Hall.

Hasina, who earlier in the morning inaugurated the conference as the guest of honour, chaired in the after-

noon the discussion on "Enabling countries to successfully address autism and other neurodevelopmental disorders (NDD) as part of Sustainable Development Goals".

Chairperson of Bangladesh National Advisory Committee for Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disorders and WHO Champion for Autism in South-East Asia Region Saima Wazed moderated it.

Poonam Khetrapal Singh, regional director, WHO Regional Office for South East Asia, co-chaired the discussion, while the PM's International Affairs Advisor Dr Gowher Rizvi spoke, among others.

In the inaugural session of the conference, Bhutanese Prime Minister Dshao Tshering Tobgay thanked

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# Not only fish, ducks too dying

FROM PAGE 1

A duck farmer for the last 10 years, he said he never saw anything like this in his life.

Saju Mia of Maijgaon village in Fenchuganj told The Daily Star, "At first, I lost my Boro paddy. I thought we could survive with duck farming in the haor. But I lost my 100 ducks."

Another farmer Abdul Quayum of Ghilachhara village lost all his 250 ducks. "It seems like a plague. I used to sell duck eggs and earn my bread. Now I have nothing to do with no source of income."

News of dead ducks floating ashore came from Fenchuganj, where duck farming is a major source of livelihood for locals around Hakaluki Haor. It prompted the livestock authorities to go for sample collection of dead fowls and determine the cause of their death.

All livestock officers from four districts of Sylhet division gathered at the divisional headquarters of the Department of Livestock Services (DLS) in Sylhet yesterday to take stock of the situation.

Following a meeting, Deputy

Director Mohammad Giasuddin of Sylhet division DLS told The Daily Star that directives were given to send samples of dead ducks to Sylhet by today for lab tests.

Contacted, Director of Bangladesh Livestock Research Institute (BLRI) in Savar, HBM Golam Mahmud, said they would inspect the flashflood affected areas today. He, however, declined to comment on the reasons of the death at this stage.

But officials concerned and experts in Dhaka are perplexed at the news of ducks' death, particularly wondering whether the rotting of paddy under floodwater have anything to do with the death of ducks.

They also urged the government to take immediate steps to find the reasons behind the death of fish and ducks.

Manzurul Hannan, director general of Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), told this newspaper that there was no denying the fact that fish and ducks were dying, but it was difficult to say that "these are happening because of the after-

math of flashflood-induced crop loss".

"This is not the first time that our haor belt is experiencing flashfloods. But never before fish and ducks died because of flashflood-related crop loss or because of, as some people are saying, rotting of paddy under floodwater," he said.

Nitish C Debnath, a national consultant at the Food and Agriculture Organisation's (FAO) Emergency Centre for Transboundary Diseases, said rotting of paddy under floodwater might be partially responsible for the water getting acidic, "but it needs studies to determine what exactly cost the lives of ducks and fish".

A former vice-chancellor of Chittagong Veterinary and Animal Sciences University, Nitish said the current situation brought to fore the need for policy initiatives to ensure better management of "our wetland ecosystem".

"We just can't gain benefits out of the haor resources only; in return, we've to ensure its healthy maintenance and better management."

Nasrin Sultana, who heads the Veterinary and Animal Science Department at Sylhet Agriculture University (SAU), said the "dark plague" could have been caused by rotten paddy and dead fish.

She warned against consuming such dead fish or ducks.

Mohammad Shahabuddin, head of fisheries department of SAU, said monitoring should be in place so that nobody was allowed to eat the dead fish or birds in any form.

Sultan Mahmud, senior fisheries officer in Moulvibazar's Kultura upazila, told this paper yesterday that 5,300kgs of limestone was dropped into haor water to neutralise acidity. Barlekha Upazila Nirbahi Officer SM Abdullah Al Mamun said around 4,000kgs of limestone was used for the purpose.

Large chunks of limestone were added to the water, and announcements were made through loudspeakers, warning people against catching the dead fish, said Mosharef Hossain, deputy director of the Department of Fisheries in Sylhet division.

# Ershad, two other accused

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He later died a fugitive.

The then Bureau of Anti-Corruption (BAC) had filed the case against ex-president Ershad and three others in 1992, two years after the fall of the former autocratic ruler.

According to the prosecution, Ershad in collusion with others allegedly caused a loss of Tk 64.04 crore to the state by purchasing radars from the USA instead of France.

The BAC pressed charges against the five accused on October 27, 1994.

In August the following year, the trial court framed charges against the four accused.

Ousted from power in December 1990, Ershad faced 21 cases, mostly for alleged corruption. However, he has already been acquitted by courts in most of the cases.

After yesterday's acquittal, he is now facing three more cases, including those for Uttara plot allotment scam and murder of Maj Gen Abul Manzoor. Both the cases are now under trial.

In the other graft case, Ershad was convicted and sentenced to jail for three years by a court. The case is now pending with the High Court that might pronounce its verdict on May 9 on the JP chief's appeal against his conviction.

Ershad's latest acquittal came amid his recent move to form an alliance with some Islamist parties ahead of the next parliamentary election due in early 2019.

The JP chairman, also a special envoy of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, was acquitted of corruption charges in four cases in August and September 2006 after he had consented to join the then ruling BNP-led four-party alliance.

He was also cleared of charges in nine more cases, including one for gold smuggling, between 2007 and 2009.

The former military ruler joined the Awami League-led grand alliance in 2009.

Around two years later, he was acquitted in a money laundering case filed in 1995 during the tenure of the then BNP government.

## ERSHAD IN COURT

Several hundred JP leaders and activists, including Ershad's brother GM Quader, Water Resources Minister Anisul Islam Mahmud, State Minister for LGRD Moshir Rahman Ranga and Ziauddin Bablu, accompanied the party chief to the court premises yesterday afternoon.

The judge read out part of the verdict

in presence of the three accused.

Ershad was sitting on a chair in the dock designated for the accused. He looked calm and didn't say anything in the courtroom after the delivery of the verdict, said court sources.

Additional security measures were taken in the court area ahead of the delivery of the verdict.

### WHY ACQUITTAL?

The court in its verdict said neither Ershad nor the other accused were benefited personally from the purchase and the ex-president didn't make way for others to be benefited.

"Ershad only approved the purchase proposal after the then defence secretary had placed a summary purchase proposal. So the two other accused were not responsible for the purchase. Therefore, they were not liable [for the purchase] and should be acquitted," said the judge in his verdict.

"Although the prosecution produced documentary and circumstantial evidence before the court, it failed to prove the charges."

According to the court, the investigation officer failed to reveal who embezzled money in purchasing the radars and what was the amount.

The names of former air chief Air Vice Marshall (retd) Altaf Hossain Chowdhury and two others should have been included in the charge sheet as prosecution witnesses, but the investigation officer didn't do so, the court added.

It observed that suspicion was cast over the merit of the case when the name of Shahjad Ali, another director of United Traders Ltd, was dropped during charge framing although he made a confessional statement before a metropolitan magistrate.

Public Prosecutor Mir Ahmed Abdus Salam expressed dissatisfaction over the verdict and said he would send the full verdict of the case to the ACC.

ACC lawyer Khurshid Alam Khan told reporters that they would file an appeal with the High Court against the lower court's verdict.

Ershad's attorney Sheikh Sirajul Islam told journalists that his client got justice.

"The radars were purchased in the national interest and there was no corruption. The documents produced before the court proved that Ershad was innocent," he said.



PHOTO: COLLECTED

Karsevaks holding aloft bricks of Babri Masjid. On December 6, 1992, thousands of frenzied karsevaks clamber up the domes of Babri Masjid to raze it.

# BJP bigwigs face trial

FROM PAGE 1

down the mosque in 1992. That trial was being held in Rae Bareilly.

Now, the BJP leaders, facing far more serious charges, will be tried in Lucknow, where a separate case was filed against "laks of unknown karsevaks". The case deals with the actual act of demolition and violence, reports The Hindu.

With yesterday's SC order, both these cases are merged and will be heard in Lucknow.

By combining the two trials, the judges want to ensure that a verdict is delivered within two years, according to a NDTV report.

The senior BJP leaders will be tried under the composite charge sheet filed by the CBI on October 5, 1993.

The CBI yesterday told the SC that top BJP leaders Advani, Joshi and Bharti had conspired with other accused for demolishing Babri Masjid in 1992, and sought revival of conspiracy charges against them.

Additional Solicitor General Niraj Kishan Kaul contended that eight leaders, who were being tried in Rae Bareilly court for promoting enmity between classes, imputations, and assertions prejudicial to national integration, should also face prosecution for criminal conspiracy.



Uma Bharti

The ASC said 13 other accused were not facing any proceedings in any court after conspiracy charges against them were dropped. He pleaded with the apex court to revive proceedings against them, reports The Times of India.

"All acted under a larger conspiracy and proceedings should go on against them under Section 120B also. All the accused worked in tandem and they should be prosecuted together," Kaul told the court while seeking revival of conspiracy charges against the leaders.

Senior advocate KK Venugopal, appearing for Advani and Joshi, refuted the allegation of the CBI and told the bench that there was no evidence to substantiate conspiracy charges against them.

"Is it a case that he conspired with more than one lakh karsevaks. What is the conspiracy? It had to be found out whether there was conspiracy at all. Section 120B was blindly mentioned in the case," he said.

Venugopal said that if the conspiracy charge was revived against the leaders then they should be tried only in Rae Bareilly court, and there should be joint trial along with karsevaks.

On December 6, 1992, karsevaks of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) demolished Babri Masjid, a centuries-old

## BABRI MASJID CASE

2 cases against Advani, MM Joshi, Uma Bharti and 'karsevaks' will be brought together in one trial.

SC transfers the case from Rae Bareilly to Lucknow.

2-year-deadline for delivering verdict.

Trial judge hearing the case will not be transferred till verdict is delivered.

Lucknow court to start proceedings in 4 weeks.

CBI must ensure presence of at least one prosecution witness in court for testimony.

Islamic structure in Ayodhya. The incident triggered communal riots across the country, claiming lives of over 3,000 people.

The site of the mosque was disputed as many Hindus believed, and continue to believe now, that it is the birthplace of Lord Ram.

Advani, along with others, was

booked by the CBI for allegedly hatching a criminal conspiracy to demolish the mosque, which led to riots. However, they were later discharged by the Allahabad High Court.

The revival of the charges against Advani, considered to be one of the front-runners to succeed Pranab Mukherjee as the next Indian president, threatens to dent his chances, according to Indian daily The Financial Express.

Some media reports had earlier claimed that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi

and BJP Chief Amit Shah proposed Advani's name for India's top post during a party meet at Somnath on March 8.

Meanwhile, senior BJP leader Uma Bharti, also water resources minister, appeared to be unfazed by the SC order.

Bharti said she was ready to sacrifice her life for construction of Ram temple in Ayodhya.

"Grand Ram temple in Ayodhya is my dream. Ready to go to prison or be hanged for India and Ram Mandir," she told reporters in New Delhi.

The BJP leader asserted that she was "proud, unapologetic" and does not repent her role in the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign.

"There was no conspiracy. Everything was in the open. I took part in Ram temple campaign with pride and confidence. I had given up the post of Chief Minister for the sake of the tricolour," she added.