

Eid joy gives way to gloom in Chandrapur

By S Dilip Roy, Lalmonirhat

Seven-year-old Sharmin Akhter was looking frequently at the path stretching behind her house at Latabar village in Chandrapur union of the district, waiting to see her father come with her Eid gifts.

Then the air of festivity changed into mourning as her grandmother Aklima Begum and neighbours began wailing on receiving the news of death of 16 people, of the union, in a road accident early yesterday. Two of the victims were Aklima's two sons including Sharmin's father Saddam Islam.

Sharmin might not have realised what she had lost, but she burst into tears watching elders mourn and cry.

"My father told me he had bought new clothes for me. He told me I would wear the new clothes during Eid," said Sharmin, only daughter of Saddam, at her home in Latabar village.

Thirty-five people, mostly low-income people and day labourers, from three villages – Batrish Hazari,

Latabar and Balapara – of the union in Kaliganj upazila of Lalmonirhat met one of the worst road accidents in recent times as they were going home on a cement-laden truck.

The truck skidded off the Dhaka-Rangpur highway at Pirganj of Rangpur around 4:30am, leaving 11 people dead on the spot and 13 others injured, said Rezaul Karim, officer-in-charge of Pirganj Police Station. Later, five others succumbed to injuries.

All the victims used to work in Gazipur.

Jahangir Alam, Union Parishad chairman of Chandrapur, said death of so many people from the same union took away the joy of celebrating Eid.

"Those who were lucky, who escaped death, told me the accident took place because the driver was driving with sleepy eyes."

The truck driver, Nazim Uddin, who also hails from the same union, managed to flee after the accident.

Meanwhile, at her home, Aklima, 4,



Father of Muznu Mia, 29, a victim of Rangpur truck accident, waits at his home in Lalmonirhat's Kaliganj upazila. At least 16 Eid holidaymakers died and eight injured as a truck flipped over early yesterday.

PHOTO: SHAR

Truck crash kills 16 home-goers

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ways for three days before and after the festival.

According to a government-supervised survey, on average, 64 people die every day from injuries suffered in traffic accidents in Bangladesh.

Sometimes, the number of the accidents increases during the Eid holidays when a huge number of people and unfit vehicles hit the highways.

On February 3 this year, a truck driven

by a driver's helper lost control and ploughed through a crowd gathered to celebrate Eid. Busman Mank in Bangladesh, killing eight people.

YESTERDAY'S ACCIDENT Khadiza Begum, a survivor of yesterday's accident, said some 40 people, including her husband Alamgir, Hossain and brother Delwar Hossain, seven to nine people, were killed.

"We got on the truck as we failed to

get bus tickets," she told this correspondent over phone lying on a bed at the RMCH.

The vehicle was already loaded with cement sacks and each of the Eid holidaymakers paid the driver and the helper Tk 400 for their trip to Lalmonirhat.

Minutes before the accident, the helper, in his early 20s, took the wheel and the driver went to the next seat to have a nap, said the woman, who was

yet to be told that her husband and brother were already dead.

Alamgir's cousins Saddam and Munir Hossain were also among the deceased. All of a sudden, the truck overturned, leaving us baffled, she said.

The driver and the helper fled.

Witness Razu Mia, who runs a roadside shop, said the truck flipped and those on it were buried under the cement sacks. Many, however, jumped and escaped unhurt, he said.

Locals, fire fighters and law enforcers rushed to the spot and found 11 people dead on the spot. Thirteen injured were taken to Pirganj Upazila Health Complex where five died, said police.

Later, the health complex authorities referred the injured to the RMCH.

At a meeting on Monday, June 25, at a home of a Wahiduzzaman, deputy commissioner of Rangpur, formed a three member committee headed by Abdul Kuddus,

assistant director of Bangladesh Road Transport Authority in the district, to investigate the incident.

Visiting the spot, the DC announced that each of the family of the deceased would be given Tk 20,000.

Rangpur police also formed a 3-member committee led by Additional SP Shahidul Islam to probe the matter. Contacted, Rezaul Karim, OC of Pirganj Police Station, said they were trying to arrest the driver and his helper.

Four-tier security for Sholakia this time

OUR Correspondent, Mymensingh

Law enforcers have arranged for four-tier security vigilance to cover the Sholakia Eid that devotes can give a safe and congenial Eid prayer.

According to the law enforcement agencies, hundreds of closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras would be installed inside the grounds besides eight watchtowers to keep eye on devotes' movement.

Moreover, eight platoons of Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), 20 platoons of Armed Police Battalion (APBn) and 10 platoons of riot police will be deployed to ensure security.

Md Anwar Hossain Khan, police chief of Kishoreganj, said around 1,000 policemen, both in uniforms and plainclothes, would be on duty around the ground and its adjacent area.

Major changes likely

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placed the budget proposal on June 11, with the new VAT and Supplementary Duty law, which seeks to impose flat 15 percent VAT instead of multiple rates.

The government, at the prescription of International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2012 and to fulfill the conditions of \$1 billion loans, framed the new VAT law but it re-fixed the deadline for enforcing the legislation twice. The last deadline was July 2017.

Finance ministry officials said initial and home-grown plan to reduce the flat rate of VAT to 12 percent during the passage of the budget in case there was opposition against the proposed 15 percent.

But in the face of opposition from businesses, lobby groups and fear of inflation, cost, policymakers now prefer deferring the new VAT law for the third time and continuing with the existing VAT Act 1991 by bringing some changes to it, said insiders.

In the second half of 2015, the government made a commitment to IMF that it would enforce the new

law in July 2017. The IMF Executive Board approved the last two instalments of \$1 billion Extended Credit Facility (ECF) based on the written commitment.

Of the two, the IMF kept one instalment on hold for delay in implementation of the new VAT law. A further delay might put the finance ministry officials in an awkward position when it sits for negotiations in Washington.

Zahid Hussain, lead economist at the World Bank Dhaka office, said the new VAT law was a case of a well prepared policy reform being blocked even after going through the key legislative and administrative approval processes as well as extensive consultations with major stakeholders.

If the new VAT law is dropped, it will be an unprecedented backtracking, from such an advanced stage of implementation readiness, in the history of economic reforms not just in Bangladesh but also elsewhere, at least in recent times," he said.

"It goes to show that reform, like

cricket, is a game of huge uncertainties. In cricket the uncertainty is regarded as glorious, but in the case of policy reforms such uncertainties signify the massively underestimated power of entrenched interests in preserving the status quo," said Zahid.

The government had aimed at collecting additional Tk 63,190 crore in the 2017-18 fiscal year with a target of Tk 248,190 crore total collection. Its last year's revised target was Tk 185,000 crore.

Of the Tk 63,190 crore, Tk 22,579 crore was supposed to be from the new VAT law.

Officials said economic growth and rise in prices of goods and services usually generate nominal growth of revenue collection every year.

To ensure collection of the additional money, the National Board of Revenue (NBR) would now have to work on finding out areas of revenue based on the existing VAT Act 1991, said officials.

Insiders said the truncated VAT rates, now applicable to nearly 20 items, including fuels, might be

increased for some items.

VAT based on tariff value or minimum value of products might be increased for some products as well.

At present, the indirect tax is collected for 85 products such as biscuit, paper and exercise books, rods and bricks based on tariff value.

The government might also withdraw exemption from VAT for some items to increase revenue collection, said officials of the Ministry of Finance.

The government plans to carry out a VAT system automation scheme, a Tk 550 crore project most of which is financed by the World Bank.

But it might take a couple of months to reconfigure the software to incorporate automation.

The excise duty on bank accounts might not increase. But the tax on bank accounts with up to Tk 100,000 debit or credit balance a year might be raised.

Ahsan H Mansur, executive direc-

tor of Policy Research Institute (PRI) of Bangladesh, said implementation of the new VAT law was one of the major supporting pillars of the government's mid-term reform targets to attain accelerated economic growth.

He said the prospect of attaining increased revenue collection would reduce if the government returned to the existing VAT law.

"But inner strength of the new law will erode if it is amended. Already the inner strengths of the law have been compromised by making some revisions," he said, citing increase in upper ceiling for VAT registration by businesses and high tariff protection for domestic industry.

He recommended not dissecting the new VAT law anymore.

"It is better not to put a new law if the new becomes a bad law because of changes," said Mansur.

Instead of further dilution of the new law, he said it would be better to go back to the present VAT law, fix the system of package or withdraw the system of package or fix VAT and continue automation of VAT system as planned, he said.

All for a blissful Eid

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the "palms just at the terminals, holidaymakers put up with troubles on road, rail and waterways but they seem to ignore it all just to be with their family members during Eid.

Eid-ul-Fitr will be celebrated across the country tomorrow if Shawal moon is sighted today. Otherwise, the festival will be held on Tuesday, ending the month-long fasting in Ramadan.

As tens of thousands of people left the country yesterday, most of the trains and launches started on time but buses were behind schedule, thanks to tailbacks on roads and at ferry terminals.

People were seen taking risky rooftop journey on buses, trains and launches as they were desperate to go home to celebrate their festival with family members in homes.

HIGHWAYS Like the previous couple of days, Dhaka-Rangpur highway, the gateway to 16 districts, is facing massive pressure of vehicles causing congestion at several points.

Fauk Hossain, an RMG employee, said he along with his wife and son started at 11:00pm Friday from Gazipur to Patna. The train, however, could only cross Bangladesh border.

The 22km stretch from Rangabandhu bridge's west end to Hatikumpul point in Sirajganj was filled with thousands of vehicles. It took a vehicle four to five hours to cross the area since Friday noon, reports our Patna correspondent.

Talking to this newspaper yesterday, union, Mohammed Daud, officer-in-charge of Rangabandhu Bridge West Zone Police Station, said pressure of vehicles intensified in the 24 hours.

Mahbub Alam, superintendent of the police in Tangail, said they have taken

sufficient measures to make the journey of peoples smooth on the highway.

Police and home-goers alleged that reckless driving and overtaking were the reasons behind traffic jams.

On Dhaka-Archa highway, it took additional two to three hours for buses to reach Paturia ferry terminal from Dhaka amid heavy traffic.

About 100 small vehicles and 70/80 buses were waiting at Paturia terminal to cross the river around noon. The number rose to nearly 500 around 8:00pm, reports our Manikganj correspondent.

Mokhlesur Rahman, contact manager of Sakhira Express at Gabtoli, said their buses were slowing down because of congestions near Paturia terminal, at Nabiganj of Savar and Aminabazar on the outskirts of the capital.

Around 4:00pm, at least 550 vehicles were waiting at Shimulia ferry terminal in Munshiganj.

Launches and speed boats were seen moving in the river carrying additional passengers. Reports our Munshiganj correspondent.

Abdul Alim, manager of BWTVC's Shimulia terminal, said an increased number of vehicles started to gather since Covid.

Visiting the Dhaka-Archa highway at Savar's Hemyatpur bus stand area yesterday, Road, Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader told reports that sufferings of home-goers were very little this time compared to what happened last year.

Visiting Dhaka-Chittagong highway in Munshiganj, Inspector General of Police AKM Shahidul Hoque said although wailing movement was slow, there was no gridlock on the highway.

TRANS Hundreds of holidaymakers, including

women and children, yesterday travelled on train roofs risking their lives and ignoring authorities' directives while the rail stations of the capital saw a massive crowd.

Most of the trains yesterday left Kamalapur Railway Station on time. However, intercity Rangpur Express were delayed by five hours. Station Manager Shitangshu Chakrabarty told The Daily Star.

Hundreds of passengers of the Rangpur Express had to wait at the platform for hours.

Shahjib Haque, an honourous student, said he collected a ticket on June 15 staying at the station for the whole night. He came to the station at 6:30am yesterday all the way from Keraniganj.

"I wanted to make a journey free of hassles but now I have to wait for almost six hours," he said.

Another family of five, heading for Gaibandha, waited at the platform for hours. "My three-and-a-half-year-old niece is already tired and the wait is becoming more and more agonising," said Fulekha Begum, who along with her family members came to the station from Meradia.

Shitangshu said the train was two-hour late over Friday while leaving Dhaka due to technical glitch and later there were some other technical problems causing yesterday's delay.

Besides, Mymensingh-bound Iskhani Express, Chapainavabang-bond Rajshahi Express, Comilla-bound Comilla Commuter, Rajshahi-bond Silk City were delayed by half to around two hours.

Md Faruk and Nurunnahar Begum, garments workers, came to Kamalapur Railway Station around 1:30pm as they found it impossible to get on the train from Cantonment Station because of

heavy pressure of standing tickets. "They bought 'standing tickets' but did not carry any seats inside the compartments. So they along with their three minor children got on the roof of Rajshahi Express. They are lucky enough to get a seat on the rooftop," Md Raj, a colleague of Faruk, said.

Although policemen were seen asking people not to get on the roof as it is illegal and risky, but nobody pay heed to them.

"There is a huge pressure of passengers and it is not possible to get them down. We are just doing our job," a policeman said.

LAUNCHES People were boarding on already jam-packed Muladi-bond Oviyan-5 launch from boats at mid-Buriganja.

Since Eid vacation at garment factories began yesterday noon, many from the sector rushed to the Sadarghat terminal to catch launches.

"I was worried whether I will be able to board my launch on time, but now I'm happy as I don't miss it," said Shafigul Islam, accounts officer of an RMG company.

Shafigul boarded on a Monpura-bond launch MV Farhan.

Many were travelling on the rooftop. Raibul Ahmed, who is going to Barisal with his mother and sister, said, "The deck is too crowded and it's too hot here. That's why we got on the roof for fresh air."

Wishing not to be named, a coast guard officer said travelling on roof can cause imbalance and launch may capsize at the deep river where wave is high. Small launches are more prone to such accidents, he added.

Adult literacy

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reading, writing and doing simple arithmetic. And I don't think this survey has followed this definition."

Rasheda, executive director of Campaign for Popular Education, however, said there has been a positive change in the literacy scenario because of the expansion of primary education in the country.

"The enrolment and completion rates at the primary level have increased in the last one decade," she said.

Contacted, AKM Ashraful Haque, project director of Monitoring the Situation of Vital Statistics of Bangladesh Project, said they followed the BBS definition of literacy for the study, and that could be a reason why a higher literacy rate was recorded.

Besides, the sample areas were increased to 2,012 in 2016 from 1,500 in the previous year, he added.

Ashraful also pointed out that the government's massive programmes for adult literacy was another reason behind the rise in the rate.

"Now it's hard to find a child who has not attended school. In rural areas, if children of a family don't go to school, NGOs find them out and take them to school."

Over the last few years, there has been a serious confusion over the actual literacy rate with ministers and government officials giving conflicting figures before the International Literacy Day observed on September 8.

Last year, Primary and Mass Education Minister Mostafizur Rahman said the literacy rate was 71 percent. It was 61 percent in the previ-

ous year.

RURAL-URBAN GAP The report shows women lagged behind men in terms of attaining literacy, as 69.5 percent women were literate compared to 75.2 percent men.

The rural-urban gap in literacy was big. The adult literacy rate in rural areas stood at 65.4 percent against 80.7 percent in urban areas.

Barisal Division had the highest literacy rate of 83.5 percent among the population aged above 15 followed by Khulna Division with a literacy rate of 71.6 percent against 80.7 percent in urban areas.

Rangpur Division had the lowest literacy rate of 69.3 percent.

According to the report, literacy rate among the population aged seven and above was 71 percent in 2016 compared to 63.6 percent in the previous year. In 2004, the rate was 50 percent.

Arms Deal with India US sees no threat to Pakistan

Rieters, New Delhi/Washington

With the US States expected to authorize India's purchase of naval drones, a senior White House official cautioned yesterday that any U.S. military transfer to India would not represent a threat to its rival neighbor Pakistan.

The official spoke to reporters in advance of U.S. President Donald Trump's first meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday, a White House visit that will include one-on-one talks and a working dinner.