



Rice crisis catches Qamrul napping

REAZ AHMAD

This year's unusual hike in rice prices caught Food Minister Qamrul Islam napping.

Both Qamrul and the ministry he leads seemed ill prepared all along, but the minister has his own logic for that. "I'm no astrologer," he told The Daily Star. "How could I possibly anticipate that there would be such a devastating flood?"

He was, of course, referring to the flashfloods that washed away 10 lakh tonnes of Boro rice, the only rice Haor farmers grow in a year.

True, it was anyone's guess that flashfloods would strike the vast backswamp in the north-east as early as March.

But the writing was on the wall. If only Qamrul and his men could read and act accordingly!

Rice reserve in public granaries was on the slides and the staple's prices were shooting up

since January. Policy think-tanks and the media had been persistent in sounding cautions against the free falling of food stock.

On top of the yearly food-aid programmes, the government initiated a new Tk 10-a-kg rice programme for 50 lakh ultra poor in late 2016. Qamrul's ministry distributed over seven lakh tonnes of rice from the government silos under this new programme, dubbing it as the prime

SEE PAGE 2 COL 1

Inu downplays concern over section 57

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Amid growing demands for the repeal of section 57 of the ICT Act, Information Minister Hasnul Haq Inu in parliament yesterday rejected allegations that the section was being used for harassing journalists.

Responding to a supplementary question, he said, "I don't think keeping section 57 of the Information Communication and Technology Act is against human rights. It's not true that the law is applicable only for journalists... The law was made for 16 crore people."

There are 2,800 registered newspapers and 1,800 online news portals in the country and several thousand journalists are working there. A very few journalists were arrested under section 57 of the ICT Act and they are getting bails when they are going to courts," he said.

The law will come into play only if anyone creates anarchy, maligns some one's character, spreads lies and religious hatred, destroys communal and religious harmony using social media like Facebook and Twitter, he added.

So far, no one has moved to the higher court to challenge the law, Inu said, responding to Jatuya Party MP Fig Tajul

SEE PAGE 30 COL 4

YET-TO-BE-IDENTIFIED DISEASE

9 Sitakunda kids die in 4 days

At least 46 others from the same neighbourhood hospitalised

ARJUN BIKASH DEY, Chittagong

Nine children have died, showing similar symptoms, in Tripura Para of Sitakunda in the last four days.

At least 46 other children in the remote hilly area were suffering from the same disease which could not be identified yet, Chittagong Civil Surgeon Azizur Rahman Siddique told The Daily Star yesterday.

Of them, 13 were being treated at Chittagong Medical College Hospital while the rest at Bangladesh Institute of Tropical and Infectious Disease in Foulderhat, he said.

Children aged between one and 12 started having fever a week ago. The other symptoms include body rash, breathing problems, vomiting and blood in stool, say locals and doctors.

Four of the victims died yesterday, one on Tuesday, three on Monday and one on Sunday.

None of them, however, was taken to hospital. They were given homeopathy treatment in the area inhabited by some 64 indigenous families.

SEE PAGE 2 COL 2



A father taking his sick child to hospital in Tripura Para of Sitakunda.

PHOTO: STAR

Eleven killed in Saudi fire

Victims include Bangladeshis

AFP, Riyadh

Eleven migrant labourers died of asphyxiation in Saudi Arabia yesterday in a fire that engulfed the windowless house they shared, Saudi authorities said.

"Firefighters put out a blaze in an old house lacking windows for ventilation. Eleven people died of asphyxiation, and six others were injured" in the southern province of Najran, the civil defence said in a tweet.

The casualties all hailed from India and Bangladesh, it said.

Nine million foreigners work in the kingdom, many of them from South Asia, according to the last official figures released in 2015.

Rights groups have called on Saudi Arabia and other Arab states to end the widespread kafala – or sponsorship – system, which severely restricts the rights of migrant labourers.

SEE PAGE 2 COL 6

Their sufferings, like floods, not receding



PHOTO: STAR

This family from Chakrotinath Char in Sariakandi of Bogra dismantled their home, loaded everything on a boat and embarked for higher ground yesterday as the swelling Jamuna threatened to devour their home.

AHMED HUMAYUN KABIR TOPUL, Padma and MAMUN-UR-RASHID, Bogra

The recent floods have affected different people in different ways. The one thing that they all have in common though is an unending suffering that shows no signs of receding, much like the floodwater.

In these trying times though, some

stories of heart-breaking compassion are bound to arise. It is these stories that give everyone a little hope but at the same time they do little to distract from the real issues. Altaf Hossain, a resident of Gunergati village in Sirajganj Sadar upazila, has been living on the flood protection embankment at 3-no dyke point area for the past four days only to protect his cows. His

four family members are staying in their house in the village, around half a kilometre away, which is also deluged.

"This cow gives around 10 litres of milk every day. I had to leave my family members in my house for her," he said, his eyes fixed in a vacant stare. "I have left my family behind in the water because I do not know how to let go of

SEE PAGE 30 COL 2

Rain worsens northern flood

STAR REPORT

Continuous downpours coupled with swelling in the major rivers like the Brahmaputra, Jamuna and Padma yesterday further worsened the flood situation in the northern districts.

According to the Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre, the rivers were flowing over the danger level at different points in Kurigram, Gaibandha, Jamalpur, Bogra, Sirajganj, Tangail and Netrakona.

Significant rainfall was recorded at 18 stations in different districts, with the highest 200mm rainfall being recorded at Durgapur of Rajshahi.

Disaster Management and Relief Minister Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury Maya has meanwhile asked the authorities concerned in five districts to stay on high alert as the areas might be affected by floods.

As of now, 6.5 lakh people of 54 upazilas in 13 districts have been affected by floods triggered by torrential rains and release of upstream water, the minister said at a briefing on the flood situation at the Bangladesh Secretariat yesterday.

"Flood could affect five new districts – Munshiganj, Manikganj, Chandpur, Shariatpur and Bhola," Maya said.

Mainly north and northeastern districts so far been affected by floods, he said, adding, many shelter centres were opened to accommodate the flood victims, who have lost their houses.

As much as 4,000 tonnes of rice, Tk 1.9 crore and 18,000 packets of dry food had been distributed among the flood victims, he added.

BOGRA

The Jamuna was flowing 58cm above the danger mark at Sariakandi point, rising by 10cm in last 24 hours.

SEE PAGE 2 COL 2

HERITAGE SITE: SUNDARBANS

Unesco decisions could end debate

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The debate on what was actually decided regarding the conservation of the Sundarbans at the 41st session of the World Heritage Committee of the Unesco could end soon with the session's decisions made public.

The session concluded yesterday but all the decisions were yet to be unveiled.

The government had claimed that the session being held in Krakow of Poland had given it the green signal to proceed with the construction of the Rampal power plant, a few kilometres away from the Sundarbans, which is a Unesco world heritage site.

However, a group of environmentalists contradicted the claim saying that the Unesco never gave such a signal. Analysing an amended document which they claimed to be the final draft for adoption, they said

SEE PAGE 10 COL 1



Introducing a new line of unique furniture imported from Italy & Spain!

Contact:
01711 401006
01714 057301
01711 560200

trade
Intercontinental

Showroom:
Tree House, House 50,
Road 23, Block B, Banani, Dhaka.