

# Virus attack on betel leaf

## Khasi farmers worried

MINTU DESHWARA, Moulvibazar

Cultivation of traditional Khasi paan (betel leaf) in Sylhet region faces setback due to attack by a virus, locally known as utram, for over a month.

The leaf with medicinal properties has significant socio-cultural and ceremonial uses and is widely cultivated in hilly lands of around 90 punjee areas inhabited by indigenous Khasi and Mandi peoples in Sylhet region.

The areas belong to Kulaura, Juri, Barlekha, Kamalganj and Srimangal upazilas of Moulvibazar, Guainghat and Kanaighat upazilas of Sylhet, and Bahubal and Chunarughat upazilas of Habiganj, said sources at the Department of Agricultural Extension.

"But betel leaf production in punjee areas faces setback as utram virus attacks the leaves when there is heavy rain and heat. The affected leaves change colour and gradually the whole of the garden is ruined," said Donbosko Khongstia, a betel leaf farmer of Lamapunjee of Guainghat upazila of Sylhet.

Mihir Sangma, a farmer of Madhabkundo punjee in Barlekha upazila of Moulvibazar, said farmers suffer loss due to frequent virus attack and other natural

calamities like cold bite and storm.

Kmen Surong, 45, betel leaf farmer of Husnabad punjee in Srimangal upazila of Moulvibazar, said earlier a mutha comprising 144 pieces of betel leaves sold for Tk 200 to Tk 300 but the prices has come down to as low as Tk 15 as people do not like to buy the virus affected leaves.

"Indigenous farmers try to deal with the problems in their traditional way. But we need modern technological support to save the betel leaves from diseases and expand its cultivation," Monika Khonglah, headman of Meghatila punjee in Kulaura upazila of Moulvibazar, said.

Agricultural officials said the nature of the ongoing attack on betel leaves seems to be a different one and they can hardly offer any help in this regard.

Monirul Islam, assistant professor of the Department of Plant Pathology and Seed Science at Sylhet Agriculture University, said betel leaf grown in the district has high demand at home and abroad for its quality and flavour.

But there is hardly any place for farmers to seek advice, especially in case of frequent attack by Ultram virus.

He suggested establishment of a betel leaf research institute in Sylhet that will be highly helpful to the growers.



A virus infected betel leaf garden in Barlekha upazila of Moulvibazar.

PHOTO: STAR

MURDER OF TWO SISTERS

## Two on two-day remand

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Jamalpur

A court here yesterday granted a two-day remand for two accused in connection with the murder of two sisters in Sadar upazila on August 1.

The Court of Senior Judicial Magistrate Niskriti Hakidak granted the two-day remand after police produced the accused before the court and prayed for five-day remand, said Court Inspector Abdul Kader Mia.

The accused are Wares Ali, 50, and Bilash Mia, 28, of Baluata village.

Wares and Bilash are paternal uncle and cousin, respectively, of Shamim, father of the slain sisters and a Malaysia expatriate.

Two sisters, Bhabna, 14, a Class IX student of a local girls' high school, and Lubna, 9, a fourth grader of a local kindergarten, and daughters of Shamim Hossain and Taslima Begum of Dewliabari village, were found murdered inside their house on August 2.

On August 1, Bhabna and Lubna were alone in their house as their mother went to her parents' house at Bagerhata Battola in the town and spent the night there, police said.

On August 2 morning, Taslima returned to their house and saw a door open and found her daughters lying on the floor with their throats slit.

Police detained Wares and Bilash on suspicion and later they were shown arrested, said Officer-in-Charge (OC) of Sadar Police Station Nasimul Islam.

On August 3, the victims' father filed a murder case, accusing some unnamed people, with the police station.

Police are yet to unearth the motive behind the murder of the two sisters, said Nasimul.

A three-member probe body, headed by Additional Superintendent of Police (Sadar Circle) Nur-e-Alam, said they had some clues behind the murders, but did not disclose those as investigation was going on, the OC said.

"We will be able to find out the reason behind the double murder and arrest the criminals within a short time," he added.

## Tortured Shefali gives birth to premature baby

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

Shefali Begum, brutally tortured in Nilphamari's Dimla upazila on Friday, gave birth to a premature baby at Rangpur Medical College Hospital (RMCH) on Monday.

"The baby, born nine weeks before the usual time, has been put at Intensive Care Unit as her condition was not stable. However, her mother Shefali is showing signs of improvement," said Prof Dr Ferdousi Sultana, a gynaecologist of the hospital.

A few local influential people tied Shefali to a mango tree and beat and kicked her indiscriminately at Uttar Baishpukur village of Dimla upazila on Friday.

Shefali, pregnant for seven months, was admitted to RMCH on Saturday. As

she felt a strong pain, doctors conducted a surgery on her on Monday afternoon and she gave birth to the baby.

A case was filed against 19 people with Dimla Police Station on charge of torturing the woman.

On Sunday night, police arrested Rashidul Sardar, 45, a member of village police, victim's brother-in-law Rafiqul, 40, and Rafiqul's mother Opeya Khatun, 65, in this connection.

Shefali's younger sister Moni Aktar said, "Criminals killed our father in 2012 over a land dispute. A murder case is now under trial at a Nilphamari court."

"Accused of the murder case are close to some local Awami League leaders and they tortured my sister after failing to settle the case outside the court," she said.

## KHADEM RAHMAT MURDER Charge framing against 14 JMB men Aug 16

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

Charges against 14 members of Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) for killing Khadem Rahmat Ali in Kaunia upazila of Rangpur in 2015 will be framed on August 16.

The Court of District and Sessions Judge Noreh Chandra Sarker, who fixed the date, shifted the murder case to Special Judge's Court yesterday, said Public Prosecutor Rathish Chandra Bhowmik.

On July 3 last year, police pressed charges against 14 JMB members for killing Khadem Rahmat Ali on November 10 in 2015.

Charge-sheeted JMB members are Masud Rana, Ihsat Ali, Liton Mia, Abu Syeed, Saddam Hossain, Nazrul Islam, Shakhwat Hossain, Sarwar Hossain, Sahadat Hossain, Toufiqul Islam, Rajibul Islam, Chandu Mia, Babul Master and Jahangir Hossain. Of them, Nazrul and Saddam were killed in gunfight with the law enforcers last year.

## Delayed plan frustrates Lalmonirhat beggars

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Lalmonirhat

Delay in implementation of a beggar-free scheme worries 3,949 listed beggars in five upazilas of the district.

"For the last five months, I have been hearing that a scheme will be taken to rehabilitate beggars but no effect is in sight yet," said Soleman Ali, 74, a beggar of Bhitorkuti village of Kulaghat union in Lalmonirhat Sadar.

"I get government's old age allowance facility but it is too scanty to maintain livelihood," he said.

Landless Basonti Bala, 68, of Chandimari village of Aditmari upazila said she became beggar after the death her husband nine

years ago.

Hamida Bewa, 65, widow of late Roich Uddin at Charitabari village of Aditmari upazila, said she has to beg to maintain herself and her physically challenged son.

"I know how to run small grocery business but I need capital to start one," she said.

The district administration has prepared a need basis database of the beggars and Tk 6.69 lakh has already been deposited to a bank account, said officials.

Lalmonirhat Deputy Commissioner AFM Alauddin Khan said, "Decision was taken to run the scheme in mid-July but it is being delayed due to official formalities. It will start very soon and all the listed beggars will be rehabilitated through providing need basis support."

## Three injured as train hits truck

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Pabna

Three people were injured when a train hit a truck at Solop Railway Station area in Ullapara upazila of Sirajganj yesterday.

Truck driver Majedul Islam, 40, and helper Md Rony Hossain, 38, were admitted to Ullapara Upazila Health Complex.

Officer-in-Charge (OC) of Sirajganj Government Railway Police Station Md Sayed Iqbal said Dhaka bound Drutojan Express hit the truck when it was crossing the rail track in the area.

Police and fire fighters rescued the victims, he added.



Farmers pile up water lilies on the bank of Char Nimtolal Beel in Sirajdikhan upazila of Munshiganj. The photo was taken recently.

PHOTO: FARHANA MIRZA

## Water lilies, a loyal friend to Munshiganj farmers

FARHANA MIRZA with ANDREW EAGLE

In many parts of the country this year's heavy rainfall has submerged extensive stretches of farmland and Sirajdikhan upazila in Munshiganj is no different. But farmers there have found an unlikely ally as they wait for the weather to change and fields to re-emerge. To keep food on the table they have turned to harvesting water lilies.

"At this time of year, one can collect many water lilies from Char Nimtolal Beel in Latobdi union," says Tajer Islam, 45, referring to a local wetland. He notes that at a time up to 40 'moths' of water lilies can be picked from dawn to noon, with one motha equivalent to sixty stems. "Wholesalers buy the lilies direct from the harvesters," he says.

The lilies are then traded at wholesale

markets in Rasunia, Imamganj, Nimtola and Taltola in Sirajdikhan, with many ultimately headed for the wholesale market in Dhaka's Jatrabari.

"I buy as many as 2,000 moths of water lilies daily," says one trader, Chan Miah Sarker from Daniapara village in the upazila. "Each motha costs around Tk 15 and sells for up to Tk 18 at the wholesale market. In Jatrabari the price is as high as Tk 27 per motha."

Across Sirajdikhan, in the now-submerged fields that usually nurture In and Aman rice varieties or jute, thousands of water lilies are facing the rain with beauty. With a season that usually runs from May until about mid-October, the national flower is serving as a food source and income generator for farmers and others facing hard times.

## Woman hangs self after killing 3-yr-old son

A CORRESPONDENT, Bagerhat

A woman allegedly committed suicide after killing her three-year-old boy and injuring another 21-month-old son in Tatal Bari area under Sharankhola upazila of the district yesterday.

The deceased were Sampa Rani Karmakar, 24, wife of Apu Karmakar, and his son Aranya Karmakar. Sampa took her life by hanging herself from the ceiling of her room.

Assistant Sub-Inspector of Tatalbari police camp Alamgir Hossain said on information, police recovered the bodies around 4:30pm after breaking the door of the room.

Critically injured Arnab was admitted to Bagerhat Sadar Hospital, said the ASI.

The reason behind the incident could not be known immediately, said the police official.

## The sweet jewel of Gour

### Gourmoti mango variety proving precious to growers, consumers

RABIUL HASAN with ANDREW EAGLE

When the mango season is waning but cravings for the delectable fruit are as strong as ever, what does one do? Well, don't worry, because nature has found a way to satisfy. In Chapainawabganj in recent years a new variety, the gourmoti mango, has been gaining popularity for its consistent size and shape, and for ripening later in the year. Derived from a single tree discovered by chance in a mango orchard at Baliadighi near Sonamasjid in 2012, the gourmoti variety is entirely the work of nature's hand.

"When we explored the orchard in 2012," says the gourmoti's discoverer and deputy director of Chapainawabganj horticulture centre Dr Saifur Rahman, "there were 250 trees to examine. Only one tree was entirely different to the others. From it we collected the first saplings to plant at our own orchard the following year." Saplings were also distributed to 21 other horticulture centres across the country to assist in verifying the growth and fruiting properties of the variety. The area of Baliadighi village is a

part of the ancient Bengal capital of Gour. 'Moti' is a kind of precious stone. Thus the gourmoti was named; and for mango-lovers nationwide, since the first harvests from the horticulture centre trees took place in 2015, it is indeed proving to be a new, mango gem. Steps are currently underway to expand cultivation.

"The tree has shown itself to be very regular," says Dr Rahman. "It produces a lot of fruit of a very uniform size. These properties are attracting growers to the gourmoti."

The gourmoti ripens in the month of September, when other mangoes are hard to find. Its skin is deep green, and the fruit is known to have very little fibre, a pleasant aroma and sweet taste, akin to more familiar langra mangoes, except that with a higher soluble sugar content, the gourmoti is sweeter than the langra. The tree however, resembles an ashwina mango tree.

"The late ripening time of the gourmoti will ensure its popularity," says Dr Rahman. "At a time when other mangoes are unavailable, the gourmoti will be there." Growers are already catching on.

"One mango trader, Jahangir Hossain, leased the orchard in Baliadighi with the original gourmoti tree," says Johurul Islam, a scientist at the horticulture centre. "Last year he sold more than 16,000 maunds of the mangoes."

"I have established a gourmoti mango orchard on seven bighas of land," says local businessman Moshir Rahman from the Nayagola area of Chapainawabganj municipality. Habibur Rahman, an orchardist from Jamtala village in Sadar upazila is likewise convinced, having dedicated four bighas to the gourmoti.

"Many growers are buying gourmoti saplings nowadays," says Dr Rahman. The horticulture centre has sold more than ten thousand of them, for Tk 80 each.

According to the deputy director of the Department of Agricultural Extension in Chapainawabganj, Monjurul Huda, local orchards accommodate around 19 lakh mango trees in total, set across 26,150 hectares. Around 350 mango varieties are produced in the district, with harvests totalling approximately 2.4 lakh tonnes of mangoes annually.



Gourmoti, a new variety of mango that ripens in September, adorns a tree at Chapainawabganj horticulture centre.

PHOTO: STAR