

BUMPER HARVEST

Wholesale price of tomatoes drops to Tk 1 a kg

MINTU DESHWARA, back from Habiganj

Tomatoes in Madhabpur upazila of Habiganj are going for Tk 1 a kg at wholesale.

In December, the price was Tk 45. A bumper harvest resulted in the plummeting of prices.

Md Atikul Haque, an agriculture officer of Madhabpur, said tomatoes have been cultivated over 250 hectares in Madhabpur -- a major tomato-producing area -- this year even though the production target was for 220 hectares.

Selim Ahmed, a farmer from Gopinathpur village in the upazila, said, "We are getting an average price of Tk 1 per kg in the wholesale markets. We won't even recover our production and harvesting costs with these figures."

The wholesale price of tomatoes was between Tk 40-45 per kg in December but fell due to the bumper harvest, he said.

Abul Mia, a farmer in Rajnagar village in the upazila said tomato bumper yields occurred due to favourable weather conditions. However, there is a shortage of facilities such as cold storages and processing units to do anything with this harvest.

"The government should encourage farmers to set up small cold storage facilities and processing units rather than helping big industrialists," he said.

Farmers demanded that the government take steps to protect the interests of the tomato growers.

Haque said he is hopeful that the government will meet the long-standing demand for a cold storage unit.

Mohammad Ali, deputy director of Department of Agriculture Extension in Habiganj, told this correspondent that a good 70 per cent people in the upazila are farmers. They will benefit if a cold storage was set up there.



The bumper crop of tomatoes in Habiganj has meant that the farmers are being forced to sell each Kg for Tk 1, counting huge losses. The picture was taken on Tuesday at Gopinathpur Bazar in Madhabpur upazila.

PHOTO: MINTU DESHWARA

BNP denied

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Meanwhile, BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir yesterday said the government has "dug a grave for democracy by snatching people's rights".

"We on behalf of our Chairperson Khaleda Zia paid tributes to the language martyrs. We are unfortunate that we are observing the day [Amar Ekushey] at a time when a grave has been dug for democracy by destroying all democratic institutions and snatching all rights of the people, including the voting rights," he told reporters after placing wreaths at the Central Shaheed Minar.

The BNP leader reiterated the demand for freeing Khaleda immediately.

Fakhrul said the party men were observing the day with broken hearts and anger as the chairperson was sent to jail in a graft case.

He renewed his party's call to people to forge national unity to restore democracy. He said his party would continue its efforts to build unity.

New Delhi

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"excellent" ties and the two countries have set an example of solving problems like maritime and boundary disputes.

"If there is any problem, we could solve it through discussions as we did it in the past. We want to build a peaceful South Asia," Hasina said.

She said that during her 1996-2001 tenure, the two countries had signed the Ganges water treaty while in her second term maritime and boundary issues were resolved.

China has vowed to boost military-to-military relations with Bangladesh by stepping up defence ties, including broadening of personnel training and cooperation in equipment technology.

Earlier, China said it planned to provide Bangladesh with a whopping \$9 billion low-interest loan to build six rail projects including one close to the Indian border.

Hasina also sought India's support in repatriation of over a million Rohingyas to Myanmar, fearing that their prolonged stay in Bangladesh could create security risks.

"We want India to put pressure on Myanmar so they quickly take back their displaced people," she said.

Hasina directed the foreign office to hold a dialogue with five countries, including India, which have borders with Myanmar, hoping that the initiative will help in solving the Rohingya crisis.

"The monsoon is nearing and keeping the Rohingyas in this way (in makeshift camps) is very risky for Bangladesh as well as for them," she told the journalists.

The journalists from Kolkata and New Delhi are on a visit to Bangladesh to participate in a three-day Bangladesh-India media dialogue.

Rape accused

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Rab then filed a case with the Chakaria Police Station.

Bakhtiar Uddin, officer-in-charge of the police station, said they sent the body of Anwar to Cox's Bazar Sadar Hospital morgue for autopsy.

According to the case filed by the victim's father, Anwar allegedly raped his daughter, a Class-IV student, when she was on her way home on February 11. The case was filed with Chakaria Police Station on February 12.

7pc progress in 7 years

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According to the agreement, among other vital preparatory work, the BBA was required to hand over the land for the expressway route for the first segment -- from the airport to Banani -- within six months. Ital-Thai was required to get the fund and submit financial closure for the work order.

Until August 2015, the BBA could hand over only half of the land of the first segment. It was only last year the government was able to hand over the entire land of this segment due to complications in land acquisition, resettlement and relocation of utility network, he said.

"We hope to formally start the construction work by March, as the concessionaire is expected to make a deal with a Chinese financier soon," he said. Ital-Thai had finished 900 pilings out of the 1,200 needed in the first segment, he added.

The concessionaire also has to start the construction work within three months of the work order issuance.

Ital-Thai Ltd had difficulties getting fund since the very beginning. Initially, it intended to seek loan from International Finance Corporation of the World Bank, which requires Environmental and Social Impact Assessment report for approving loans. Ital-Thai failed to get the assessment done in time.

In 2015, it signed a contract with China Railway Construction Corporation but it amounted to nothing. It signed another deal with Chinese Investment Global Foundation Company in December 2016 and that too did not work.

The contract was revised in December 2013, incorporating alteration to a 4km alignment in the southern end of the project to avoid land acquisition.

Though there was a sovereign guarantee that the concessionaire's revenue generation would not be hindered in anyway, the government unilaterally altered two vital ramps, one on Manik Mia Avenue and the other at Palashi, said a well-placed

source.

Similar unilateral changes to ramp layouts took place in Tejgaon and Kakoli. Of the 31 ramps, four have now been altered and shortened.

"About 28 percent revenue return was calculated with the Manik Mia Avenue ramp and its alteration might have dampened the prospective financiers," said Prof Shamsul Hoque, a member of Dhaka Elevated Expressway's technical expert team.

ITAL-THAI VERSION

The layout design has been changed more than 100 times to resolve land availability issues, accommodate reservations raised by various government and private organisations, said Montchai Musicabud, representing Ital-Thai.

Financial closure would be done within March and formal construction start date would be issued by the BBA in the first week of April, marking the start of the concession period, said Montchai.

He said formal construction work

was expected to start in April and the first segment completed by mid-2019.

For the first segment, Ital-Thai got some land only in February 2016 and it finished 50 percent of the required ground piling and pile cap, said Montchai, adding that about 56 piers out of 350 have been done.

The physical work started in August 2016.

Ital-Thai is eyeing production of 12 I-girders per day from March and five cross beams were being installed, he said.

The company has so far spent nearly \$90 million on mobilising machines and equipment, physical work, design work and management fees, he claimed.

FUNDING

The project cost was revised to Tk 8,940 crore along with the contract agreement.

The government is to spend Tk 4,885 crore on land acquisition, resettlement and relocation of utility service lines. Therefore, the total

cost of the project is Tk 13,825 crore.

The government has already spent Tk 2,500 crore on land acquisition, resettlement and utility relocation.

It would also pay 27 percent of the project costs as Viability Gap Fund after completion of the first segment.

THE EXPRESSWAY

The proposed route of the expressway is Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport-Kuril-Banani-Mohakhali-Tejgaon-Moghbar-Kamlapur-Saidabad-Jatrabari and Dhaka-Chittagong highway in Kutubkhali.

The 47km length includes the length of the mainline (20km) and 27km of the 31 ramps in the original design.

The first segment is nearly 7.5km long, second one 6km and the third segment 6.5km long. The entire scheme requires 220 acres, 71 acres for the first segment.

The government has to acquire 26 acres of private land along the entire route and at least 7 acres for the first segment alone.

Myanmar destroying massacre evidence

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"It is clear this is happening under the orders of government," noted the project director.

The reported mass grave site in Maung Nu of Buthidaung township in northern Rakhine was the location of a massacre which took place in August last year, according to reports of rights groups.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) said survivors had told them the army had "beaten, sexually assaulted, stabbed, and shot villagers who had gathered for safety in a residential compound" in the village. Dozens were said to have been killed.

Satellite imagery obtained by the HRW showed that Maung Nu had been razed in the aftermath.

The Doctors Without Borders in December last year said the Myanmar security forces killed at least 6,700 Rohingyas in one month following their crackdown in Rakhine in late August last year.

Around 700,000 Rohingyas have taken shelter in Bangladesh since the crackdown began, and the influx, though slow, still continues.

Myanmar has all along refuted the

allegations of ethnic cleansing. Late last year, an army probe into its own conduct during the 2017 crackdown exonerated itself of any blame.

However, in a surprise move last month, the Myanmar military admitted that the Rohingyas found in a mass grave at the village of Inn Din had been killed by its soldiers.

Last week, Yanghee Lee, the UN special rapporteur for human rights in Myanmar, said the crisis had the "hallmarks of genocide".

The UN official, who is leading a UN fact-finding mission, has been barred from entering Myanmar.

Talking to The Guardian, HRW Deputy Asia Director Phil Robertson said, "We have heard about the allegations of the destruction at Maung Nu and we are concerned that this could be part of broader efforts to conceal the atrocities committed by Burmese security forces."

Other parts of Rakhine appear to have been bulldozed, according to an AFP report last week, which contained aerial photographs showing former Rohingya villages completely flattened.

The bulldozing appeared to target

villages that had been razed during last year's military crackdown, mentioned the report.

Lewa said, "The bulldozers are destroying not just parts of some villages that were burned but also parts where houses were abandoned but still intact."

Asked about the reported bulldozing of Rohingya villages, Myanmar government spokesperson Zaw Htay said, "Local government is clearing that area. No villagers there. No housing. Only plain land."

He further said they have to "construct new villages there for the resettlement" of returning Rohingyas.

On reports of destroying the mass grave, Htay said, "I want to know what evidence you are talking about? Was it Arsa terrorist group? Bengali people around the world?"

"Please give me the reliable, concrete, strong primary evidence, please - not based on the talking story of Bengali people around the world, Bengali lobbyists," he added.

UK MPS CALL FOR ICC REFERRAL

More than a hundred British lawmakers have called for an International Criminal Court (ICC) referral for

Myanmar's military general Min Aung Hlaing over the security operations against the Rohingyas in Rakhine.

"It is time for the British government to unequivocally state that the situation in Myanmar should be referred to the International Criminal Court," they said in a letter to British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson yesterday.

The letter was signed by over a hundred MPs, including Labour Party Lawmaker Rushanara Ali.

They said the Myanmar military and General Min Aung Hlaing have paid no meaningful price for their "security operations", and Hlaing's sense of impunity appears to be emboldening him.

"He [Hlaing] is aggressively escalating existing conflicts against other ethnic groups in the country, threatening the peace process," the letter read.

It said the UK has so far shown diplomatic leadership by securing a statement from the UN Security Council and building international consensus on steps needed to be undertaken by Myanmar. However, the demands of the Security Council have largely been ignored.

"Now it is time to go further," it said

about the call for ICC referral for General Hlaing.

"Although at present such a step [ICC referral] would likely be opposed within the UN Security Council by Russia and China, we must work to build an international consensus to convince these countries to change their positions."

This process should start with the British government ensuring that the European Union announces support for a referral to the ICC in the meeting of the EU Foreign Affairs council on February 26, the letter read.

"The more countries can be persuaded to support a referral, the more the sense of impunity with which General Min Aung Hlaing and his military operates will be reduced. This in turn may help prevent further military offensives against civilians."

The British government should also work to secure agreement that the EU bans supply of all equipment to Myanmar military, and ends military training and cooperation programme, it mentioned.

The MPs also want a UN-mandated global arms embargo against Myanmar.

'We are waiting our turn to die'

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hospitals and other civilian infrastructure, saying such attacks could be war crimes.

The pace of the strikes appeared to slacken overnight, but its intensity resumed later yesterday morning, the Observatory said. Pro-government forces fired hundreds of rockets and dropped barrel bombs from helicopters on the district's towns and villages.

"We are waiting our turn to die. This is the only thing I can say," said Bilal Abu Salah, 22, whose wife is five months pregnant with their first child in the biggest eastern Ghouta town Douma. They fear the terror of the bombardment will bring her into labour early, he said.

"Nearly all people living here live in shelters now. There are five or six families in one home. There is no

food, no markets," he said.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) yesterday called for humanitarian access to Ghouta, especially to reach wounded people in critical need of treatment.

"The fighting appears likely to cause much more suffering in the days and weeks ahead," said Marianne Gasser, ICRC's head of delegation in Syria. "This is madness and it has to stop."

The Union of Medical Care and Relief Organisations, a group of foreign agencies that fund hospitals in opposition-held parts of Syria, said eight medical facilities in eastern Ghouta had been attacked on Tuesday.

The Syrian government and its ally Russia, which has backed Assad with air power since 2015, say they do not target civilians. They also

deny using the inaccurate explosive barrel bombs dropped from helicopters whose use has been condemned by the United Nations.

The Observatory said many of the planes over Ghouta appear to be Russian. Syrians say they can distinguish between Russian and Syrian planes because the Russian aircraft fly higher.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov yesterday described as "groundless" accusations that Russia bears some of the blame for civilian deaths in eastern Ghouta.

A commander in the coalition fighting on behalf of Assad's government told Reuters overnight the bombing aims to prevent the rebels from targeting the eastern neighbourhoods of Damascus with mortars. It may be followed by a ground campaign.

"The offensive has not started yet.

This is preliminary bombing," the commander said.

Rebels have also been firing mortars on the districts of Damascus near eastern Ghouta, wounding four people yesterday, state media reported. Rebel mortars killed at least six people on Tuesday.

Eastern Ghouta is one of a group of "de-escalation zones" under a diplomatic ceasefire initiative agreed by Assad's allies Russia and Iran with Turkey which has backed the rebels. But a rebel group formerly affiliated with al Qaeda is not included in the truces and it has a small presence there.

Conditions in eastern Ghouta, besieged since 2013, had increasingly alarmed aid agencies even before the latest assault, as shortages of food, medicine and other basic necessities caused suffering and illness.

Oxfam investigates new sexual misconduct cases

AFP, London

Oxfam revealed Tuesday it was investigating 26 new cases of sexual misconduct since the crisis erupted over its handling of a 2011 prostitution scandal in Haiti, which the British charity called a "wake-up call".

Chief executive Mark Goldring told a parliamentary committee in London that the cases varied in their seriousness, while 16 related to its international operation.

"They range in time frame from more recent events to long historic events where people did not report them at the time," he said.

Goldring added he believed the latest cases had emerged as "a direct response to the publicity" around the Haitian scandal.