

BANGLA NEW YEAR

Sweetmeat makers see huge sales

JAGARAN CHAKMA

Exchange of sweets, known as *mishi* in Bangla, is very common in social and religious rituals in Bangladesh. But the *Pahela Baishakh*, the first day of Bangla New Year, has become the biggest occasion for sweet makers and sellers in recent years.

A buying spree of the corporate sector has pushed up this year's sweet sales by three times compared to that of the normal days. Corporate companies send sweets to their dealers, retailers, clients, banks, media outlets and friends as gift.

"We have bought 24,000 pieces of large *rosogolla* this year. Each piece costs Tk 25," said a senior official of a business group that has exposure to steel and cement business.

The group alone spent around Tk 6 lakh for buying *rosogolla*. Other business groups, banks, non-banking financial institutions, public relations firms, television channels and different trade bodies and associations have spent significant sums of money just to buy sweets on *Pahela Baishakh*.

According to Bangladesh Sweets Manufacturers Association, around 3,500 sweetshops are registered with the organisation. Of them, around 250 are in the capital city.

The association has no data on the sales turnover of sweets in the country.

But its leaders said their sales during the Bangla New Year go up by two to three times than during regular sales period.

"Our *Pahela Baishakh* sales are higher by 2.5 times compared to regular sales period," said Mohammed Ali, president of Bangladesh Sweets Manufacturers Association and also the owner of Muslim Sweets.

He said sweet makers who have corporate clients are making the most out of this occasion.

For example, Premium Sweets, a high-end sweet maker, has seen a significant rise in its sales this year.

Mahburur Rahman Bakul, head of corporate affairs of Premium Sweets, said their sales almost doubled on this occasion compared to last year's sales.

He said 70 percent of the private banks are their clients and they bought a good amount of sweets on this occasion because of Premium's high quality.

"Corporate companies send sweets and allied products as gift to different offices, clients and special persons," he added.

He, however, refused to disclose their sales figure on *Pahela Baishakh* as it is a "business secret".

Mehedi Hassan, manger of Bonolata Sweets and Bekary's Uttara outlet, said demand of sweets increases during *Pahela Baishakh* celebrations.

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Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina comforts a woman at a function at the Gono Bhavan yesterday. During the programme, the PM distributed cheques of financial assistance among the family members of those killed and injured in the August 21 grenade attack in 2004. Hasina herself narrowly survived that day. PHOTO: PTI

RANGPUR LAWYER MURDER Accused Kamrul

confesses his involvement

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinaipur

A prime accused in lawyer Rathish murder case, Kamrul Islam, has admitted his involvement in the crime before a Rangpur court, sources say.

He was placed on a 10-day remand on April 5.

According to court officials, Rangpur police produced Kamrul before the Additional Chief Judicial Magistrate's Court around 8:30pm on Thursday amid a tight security.

His statement was recorded until 2:30am, the officials said.

Kamrul was produced before the court two days before the expiry of his 10-day remand, granted by the same court.

Babul Mia, officer-in-charge of Rangpur Sadar Police Station, said police brought him to the court when he agreed to give confessional statement in the murder case.

Rathish, public prosecutor at the Special Judge's Court in Rangpur, was murdered over alleged extramarital affairs between his wife Snigdha Sarkar Dipa and Kamrul, police and Rab said earlier.

Snigdha and Kamrul are in Rangpur jail, said police.

On April 5, Dipa and her two students Rokon and Sabuj, who are also accused in the case, gave their confessional statements before the same court, said police.

Snigdha and Kamrul are teachers at Tajhat High School, while Rathish was the president of the school's managing committee. Sabuj and Rokon were class eight students of the school. The two were sent to Juvenile Correction Centre in Jessore.

On information gleaned from

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Rickshaw driver murders example of honesty

ABU BAKAR SIDDIQUE AKAND, Gazipur

It was around 11 in the morning of Thursday.

Like any other day, Firoz Mia was driving his rental battery-run auto-rickshaw from Mawna to Kewabazar on Sreepur road, hoping to get some passengers there.

He saw a bundle of money lying abandoned on the road near Mawna intersection.

The 37-year-old picked up the bundle and tried to find the owner, but nobody was around.

"I didn't even count the money," Firoz said.

He decided to deposit the money with local trader Mujibur Rahman, owner of "Mayer Doa Tiles and Sanitary".

"I thought it would be wise to deposit the money with him," said Firoz, a resident of Sreepur's Kewa Akandabari area.

Mujibur later found out that there were 99 notes of Tk 1,000 and two notes of Tk 500 in the bundle.

Mujibur had written Firoz's phone number down before the latter left for work.

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Rejoinder

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constructed 2-lanes were opened to traffic immediately after construction in various segments starting from 2013 to 2016 to withstand the immense traffic volume. So, major portion of the new road has been carrying traffic for over four years. The old 2-lane was treated with a surface course of 50mm and profile correction.

The road was designed for 10 years life so that it can sustain 98 million equivalent standard cumulative axle loads (ESAL). But a survey conducted in October 2015 found much higher 305 million ESAL. After that project's consultant reported 98 Million ESAL would be exhausted within 3 to 4 years of opening road to traffic. The determined vehicle damage factor (VDF) for heavy and medium trucks were 15.59 and 19.27, higher than the set guideline of 4.62 and 4.8 respectively which was due to the heavily overloaded trucks. The magnitude of overloading is so high that it leads to pavement distress and failure of pavement structure much earlier than the design life. This caused early rutting and tearing of the uppermost layer. Based on the analysis, the consultant recommended for immediate measures including axle load control and immediate periodic maintenance to save the constructed pavement.

There was a panel of expert for necessary directives on technical issues during entire construction period that checked different segments of project road, and quality of construction and materials, including bitumen. They identified the overload too as significant factor to affect design life and rutting of the highway. So, it is not correct as stated in the report that experts were not engaged to determine the causes of the ruts. As recommended by supervision consultant and panel of experts, the Ministry of Road Transport and Bridges took necessary initiatives for maintenance

work on the road immediately after its opening and overload control. So, the information on project cost and bitumen are not correct.

OUR REPLY

The rejoinder justified damages on the highway and the subsequent maintenance works flatly blaming overloading but it carefully avoided telling why the authorities could not stop plying of overloading vehicles. A weight measuring scale was set up at Sitakunda in 2012 to check overloading but vehicles with extra tonnes of goods kept running. The ministry claimed steps were taken to control overloading but is silent about how vehicles crossed the weighbridge with extra load, damaging the expanded highway. Mobile courts on several occasions also fined overloaded vehicles on the highway. The ministry recently sent a proposal to the Planning Commission seeking Tk 940 crore for maintenance of the highway where it mentioned ruts developed on the highway because of overloading. It went for the maintenance project to save the highway, which could have been done by checking overloading. It is not also clear from the rejoinder as to why the ministry did not design the road, considering the fact that overloading would continue.

The rejoinder mentioned that experts checked quality of construction and the materials, including bitumen during construction phase. However, The Daily Star story pointed out that the same was necessary after the ruts developed on the highway to determine its cause.

During a round visit on the highway, The Daily Star reporter found the highway is in good shape at many points, meaning overloading had no impact there. The ministry has no explanation how this can happen on the same road.

We stand by our report.

Baishakhi smile

FROM PAGE 1

process of renewal. This for me is the essential Baishakh, which is not plastic like the cardboard owls or tigers dangling on shopping mall's entrances or the pixel based SMS's promising happiness through indulged consumerism.

The beginning of the New Year with a smile is all that matters: some may find joy in a clay pot of rural food enriched by the presence of fried Hilsa; some may find the smile by loitering aimlessly in the streets while seeing and being seen; some may find the smile in participating in the grand gala where the extraordinary artists are performing for the ordinary; some may find joy in becoming a cultural tourist or going native for a day; some may find joy in milking money while others may find comfort in buying future memory; some may find the smile by immersing in an illusory national identity while

embracing many imported mannerisms and rituals.

Baishakh, or rather its celebration, has evolved over the years. The strategic readjustment of the calendar by the Mughal Emperor Akbar to ensure revenue collection that is in sync with the harvesting pattern has gone a long way to becoming a cultural icon. The seeds of Chhayanat's resistance against the encroachment of Urdu became the banyan tree of Ramna of all our cultural shelter. The educated middle class, who were at the forefront of forging a national consciousness, came mostly from the University of Dhaka. They have been the symbolic Nor'westers that usher in changes. They have been there to administer the emergence of Bangladesh, the reemergence of democracy. They are the proverbial fluttering flag of the new like a Kaalbaishakhi storm. Baishakhi is

a seasonal juncture when nature and man work in unison. The sound of protest that is looming large shows that there is a brewing tension over a practice that needs revision and renewal. Yes the sky looks grim as the bellowing storm darkens the horizon when a particular class feels that they are being deprived of their chance of bringing change to their lot. Baishakh will bring in the monsoon and wash away some traditional thoughts, and offer us the new. After all, one of the teachings of Baishakh is that you cannot cling onto something just because it is established or practiced for a long time. Each system demands renewal, and renewal brings smile. I wish you all a genuine smile on *Pahela Baishakh*.

(The writer is Professor of English (on leave), University of Dhaka. Currently he is the Head of the Department of English and Humanities at ULAB)

Russia blames Britain

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Ghoutha carried out shelling of Damascus from April 3 to 6.

Russia has repeatedly accused rebels of staging or spreading rumours of chemical attacks, but the involvement of Britain is a new claim.

It comes as London has blamed Moscow for a nerve agent attack on a former double agent and his daughter in the English city of Salisbury last month.

In March Russia's General Staff said that rebels were planning a "provocation" in Eastern Ghoutha with women and children set to play victims of a chemical attack.

President Vladimir Putin later referred to this claim, saying on April 4 that Russia had "irrefutable proof" that rebels were planning an attack with "poisonous substances".

Meanwhile the UN Security Council met again yesterday, at Russia's

request, to try to defuse the standoff.

US President Donald Trump appeared to back away from earlier threats of imminent action and France's Emmanuel Macron yesterday called for stepped-up talks with Moscow.

But at UN, French Ambassador Francois Delattre warned that Syria's government had reached a "point of no return" by using chemical weapons and vowed to confront the "intolerable threat" of such attacks to global security.

Russia repeated its warnings against an escalation.

"The most important thing is to refrain from ill-considered and dangerous actions that would constitute a gross violation of the UN Charter and would have unpredictable consequences," Putin's office said in a statement after he and French President Emmanuel Macron spoke by telephone.

After a meeting with national security advisors Thursday, the White House said it had not yet decided how to respond to last week's suspected chemical attack which the US, France and Britain blame on Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Macron told Putin he wanted to "intensify" talks in order to "bring peace and stability to Syria", the French President's office said in a statement.

A White House briefing on a call between Trump and British Prime Minister Theresa May said that they "continued their discussion of the need for a joint response to Syria's use of chemical weapons".

But US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis struck a cautious note, telling lawmakers that the need to "stop the murder of innocent people" had to be weighed up against the risk of things "escalating out of control".

Responsibility Myanmar's

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"The access to the places would enable UNHCR to assess the situation and provide information to refugees about conditions in the places of origin, as well as to monitor any possible future return and reintegration of refugees," read a UNHCR statement.

The UN body noted that refugees in Bangladesh have said before considering returning to Myanmar, they would need to see concrete progress in relation to their legal status and citizenship, security, and their ability to enjoy basic rights at home in Rakhine State.

Nearly 700,000 Rohingya fled military atrocities in Myanmar into Bangladesh since August last year, joining over 300,000 others, who escaped earlier waves of violence in Rakhine State, where they have been deprived of citizenship and other basic rights since 1982.

Myanmar denies the accusations of genocide and ethnic cleansing and said the military action was in response to insurgent attacks on police posts on August 25.

The UNHCR said it would like to extend its sincere thanks to the government and people of Bangladesh for the hospitality, protection, and assistance provided to the refugees from Myanmar.

The MoU is signed at a time when there has been uncertainty over Rohingya

UNHCR SAYS

- Conditions in Myanmar are not conducive yet for safe, dignified and sustainable return
- Rohingyas want concrete progress on citizenship, security and basic rights
- UNHCR, other actors should have full access to Rakhine
- Restrictions on movement of Rohingyas in IDP camps have to be eased
- Responsibility for creating safe conditions lies with Myanmar

repatriation though Myanmar signed a bilateral deal with Bangladesh in November last year.

Subsequently, the two countries signed a physical arrangement, and in February Bangladesh handed over a list of 8,032 Rohingyas to Myanmar, which, however, until now has verified only some 700 refugees, making them eligible for return. No return has yet taken place.

Experts had suggested a tripartite agreement involving the two countries and UNHCR but Myanmar refused. In the absence of a tripartite agreement, the UNHCR has signed the MoU with

Dhaka.

The refugee agency said together with UN Development Programme, it is negotiating with Myanmar for an agreement to outline the scope of cooperation between these agencies and Myanmar government in Rakhine State.

"The agreement would aim to set forth a framework for refugees' voluntary repatriation in line with international standards, aim to create conditions that are conducive to eventual voluntary repatriation, and provide humanitarian and development assistance for all people of Rakhine State."

Another "practical measure", it said, is to ease restrictions on movement for the internally displaced persons (IDPs) encamped in the central townships of Rakhine State to help build confidence among refugees in Bangladesh.

"Such concrete measures would help demonstrate to refugees that the government of Myanmar is committed to a sustainable solution."

In a meeting with UNHCR officials after signing of the memorandum, Foreign Secretary Shahidul Haque discussed the current state of humanitarian response to the Rohingyas in Cox's Bazar camps.

"Both sides agreed to cooperate in relocation of Rohingyas to Bhashan Char," reads a foreign ministry statement.

Asked about the MoU signed with the

UNHCR, Bangladesh's Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) Abul Kalam said it is an important development, especially as there are issues of ensuring voluntariness of the Rohingya returns and creating safe conditions back in Rakhine.

The UNHCR will ensure necessary protection, support and funding for management of the repatriation, he said.

Prof CR Abrar of international relations department at Dhaka University said that by signing the MoU with UNHCR, Bangladesh reaffirms its commitment to the refugees' right to voluntary return.

However, it is frustrating that the conditions in Myanmar are not in favour of repatriation at all, he said.

Besides, Myanmar's Social Welfare Minister Win Myat Aye during his visit to Bangladesh this week said the Rohingyas, on their return, have to apply for national verification cards "as migrants" as preconditions for citizenship.

"This is quite unacceptable," Prof Abrar, also executive director of the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit of DU, told The Daily Star.

It's good that Bangladesh has done its preparatory task by signing the MoU, and the rest will depend on how Myanmar creates the conditions for safe and voluntary returns and how the interna-

tional community can put pressure on Myanmar, he added.

"It is very important that Bangladesh and the international community hold Myanmar accountable for genocide and mount pressure on Myanmar."

15,000 join

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campaign titled Dettol Porichonno Dhaka.

Formal announcement of the record will come soon, he hoped.

Crowds of hundreds of residents spilled over the streets beside the police headquarters, Bongo Bazar and Dhaka University's Curzon Hall and took part in the campaign to raise awareness about keeping the environment clean.

The mayor said one of the major problems facing the city was the lack of people's participation in cleanliness.

The initiative, he hoped, would motivate citizens to engage in cleaning up the city.

Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda, who took part in the campaign, said it was possible to keep the city clean if every resident did their part and cleaned their own yards.

Popular film star Riazuddin Ahmed Siddiqui Riaz, DMP Commissioner Asaduzzaman Mia and Gazi Group chairman Gazi Golam Dastagir also participated in the event.