

# Farmers facing loss despite high yield

MINTU DESHWARA, back from Sunamganj

The haor farmers in Sunamganj have achieved a bumper production of Boro but are being badly hit by the low market price.

The crop witnessed the highest acreage this year, but the farmers have failed to receive even the minimum price that prevailed in last couple of years. The bumper output brings them extra pain instead of any extra hope.

They have now given up hope of any profit and are worried about recovery of the production costs.

Sources in the Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE) of Sunamganj said this year's target was planting Boro on 219,000 hectares of land in the district, but the paddy was planted on 222,719 hectares.

Farmers told this correspondent that they were not interested to culti-

vate paddy next season because the price is disappointing. Cultivation cost was Tk 8,000 per bigha (33 decimals) as the land needs fertilisers, insecticides, weeding out, harvesting and labour. They get 15/16 maunds of paddy per bigha and are selling it at Tk 500-550 per maund, which has made them lose heart in paddy cultivation.

Most of the farmers buy fertilisers and insecticides on credit. After harvesting, they sell paddy in the market and pay the dues.

Minu Ahmed, resident of Sreepur village under Tahirpur upazila, said he cultivated four bighas of land at a cost of Tk 32,000. He got 58 maunds of paddy and sold it for Tk 31,320. He now has no idea how he is going to repay the loan and maintain his family.

Farmer Manos Mia of Uttar Sreepur village in Tahirpur said he had cultivated

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Farmers sell sacks of paddy in Sunamganj's Tahirpur upazila last week. The joy of a bumper harvest was eclipsed by a sudden price dip. PHOTO: MINTU DESHWARA

## An open affair with death

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police here. Don't worry, take some."

It was March 17 evening when two of our reporters visited the marketplace.

Camper Bazar is part of the Geneva Camp, a densely-populated settlement of more than 25,000 Urdu-speaking Biharis.

Also known as Bihari Camp, it is at the heart of the capital's Mohammadpur. Each family with eight to 10 members on average lives in one room, and around 90 people share a latrine.

The Daily Star visited the spot again the following day -- twice -- to see whether the sale of yaba happens there regularly. The place was found to be a hotspot for yaba trade even at midnight with small groups of youths waiting for customers.

After an eye contact, one of them approached our correspondent and wanted to know whether "anything" was needed. Asked what he meant by that, the youth replied "guti", another name for yaba.

Our reporters went there three straight days and saw the same picture. Locals and shop owners seemed oblivious to it all.

The Bihari camp is under Mohammadpur Police Station. It is not far from Adabor and Sher-e-Bangla Nagar police stations. The Rab-2 office is only one and a half kilometres away while the ward councillor's office is within walking distance.

Kabir Hossain, an employee at a private firm and a yaba consumer who frequents the Geneva Camp, said the place functions as a yaba trade hub for a large part of the city.

From the camp, the pills also go to PC Culture, Shekhertek and Mansurabad in Mohammadpur and also to Dhanmondi. The sellers also run home delivery services for regular customers.

Kabir, a university graduate, has been buying the pills from the camp for over five years. He said their prices depend on quality and also fluctuate from time to time.

"Price of Champa is very low. It hovers between Tk 120 and 140. But if you want something better like R7, you have to pay Tk 200-220. Other dealers sell it for Tk 250 and above outside the camp."

People of all ages and from different walks of life are its consumers. But college and university students are the most frequent visitors of the yaba dens at the Bihari camp.

"Sometimes police conduct raids but only at some specific points. Most of the time, the peddlers somehow get tip-offs and manage to evade arrest. Sometimes, some small peddlers get arrested with only 10-20 pills. They, however, get out of prison on bail within a month or two."

It is hard to say exactly how many people are involved in the yaba trade at the camp. Quoting a seller, a TV report puts the number at 400-500.

"The number fluctuates because they are often arrested and get released on bail. Our bosses are very rich ... they are millionaires. They have luxury homes and cars. Nobody dares to

intervene in this business," said the peddler in the report, aired almost a year ago and available on YouTube.

He also talked about a side business that flourished at the camp alongside the yaba trade.

Tiny rooms are often rented for smoking yaba. Young men and women sometimes rent those to smoke it together.



Slums on the sides of railway lines in Karwan Bazar. PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Men have to pay much higher than the normal rent to smoke with female partners. The rooms are rented on hourly basis, and the cost ranges from Tk 500 to Tk 1,500.

With the help of a source, one of our journalists recently got access to such a room on condition that the identities of the persons involved would not be disclosed.

Through a maze of narrow alleyways, the source took the reporter to a yaba peddler who rents out a room to yaba addicts.

It was a small room on the first floor of a three-storey building. It had no window or ventilator. Inside, there were a mat, a bed sheet and bundles of foil papers used for melting yaba and smoking its vapour.

In the area, many such rooms are used for this purpose, said the seller.

"This room is actually in a police informant's possession," the source said.

The Daily Star, however, could not independently verify it.

People from different social classes -- many from well-off families -- rent these rooms, said the source.

"To buy drugs, they [addicts] even resort to mugging. Sometimes, they get aggressive and attack people," mentioned the peddler, who himself is an addict. He claimed to have got into the trade only to maintain an uninterrupted supply of yaba for himself.

Bihari Camp is only a small -- though very significant -- part of a multifaceted story that speaks of failure, greed, corruption, criminality and mindless desperation -- in many ways and on the part of many.

Welcome to the dark side of the town.

Around six kilometres from the camp, Karwan Bazar railway slum used to be a hotbed of yaba trade.

Even six months ago, peddlers could be seen pitching the pink pills

openly at customers. But things have changed now.

One of our reporters visited the place around 10:00pm on March 25.

A number of slum dwellers told the reporter that the drug lords, who used to run the show, left the business, making a fortune from it.

"The trade has remained almost closed for the last six months; only a

the trade "because of continuous extortion by police".

Policemen also "harass customers" and make them pay. That's why many have stopped coming to the spot. "Now, mobile service is very popular and also safe."

Faruk claimed he went to jail at least ten times in the last five years. Now, he is on bail in three cases over drug peddling. Four other cases on the same charge have been disposed of.

"Right now, we have no money and we are starving. Earlier, my boss used to protect me and pay local policemen. I was made accused in cases because of special raids; local policemen were not a problem. But things changed."

He said "his boss" was a woman at the slum who got rich through the illegal trade.

He refused to disclose her identity and said, "I no longer have any contact with her."

"People like us cannot sell the drug now. Only a few informants for police are running the trade now," Faruk claimed.

His wife, Marjina, also used to sell the pills.

The couple, who have three children, now work as day labourers at Karwan Bazar wholesale market.

"I am suffering from tuberculosis. I am in this mess just because of my greed," he said.

**'THEY SUPPLY CRYSTAL TOO'**

Apart from these two places, yaba sale takes place at other locations in the city as well -- from Malibagh rail crossing to Moghbazar rail crossing, Gudaraghat area in Mirpur-1, Tin Neta Mazar near Suhrawardy Udyan, Balurghat Beribadh area in Old Dhaka, Dhupkhola playground, Sattola slum and the bus terminal in Mohakhali, Korail slum, Dakkhin Khan, and slums in Bhasantek,

few peddlers are active now," said Selim (not his real name), who has been living there for 25 years.

"Business is not good here. It's not due to police action but because small peddlers were facing losses as they were forced to pay law enforcers more," he said.

"Several drug lords led the illegal trade with the help of some dishonest police officers."

Talking to locals, this newspaper learnt that police pick up only peddlers and customers, not the drug lords.

"Many small sellers" are now accused in a large number of cases, they said.

Take Lipi (not her real name) as an example. She used to sell yaba under a drug baroness' protection. But Lipi is now an accused in 24 cases, according to her neighbours.

The Daily Star could not contact Lipi despite several attempts.

While two reporters of this newspaper were talking to locals, a middle-aged woman appeared suddenly and warned that police were coming. She advised all to run to Karwan Bazar kitchen market to avoid any "bad situation". All got dispersed.

Outside the slum, one of the locals later told this newspaper that only the informants for police now sell yaba there.

Around 7:00pm the following day, a few peddlers were seen loitering along the rail lines and calling potential customers in low voices.

**'ALL BECAUSE OF MY GREED'** Faruk aka Falan, 46, has been living in the railway slum for over 20 years.

Once a rickshaw-van puller, he claims to have entered the illegal trade only to maintain smooth supply for his own consumption.

Talking to this newspaper on March 31, Faruk said over a hundred yaba peddlers were there around six months back. But almost all of them stopped



The Geneva camp market, popularly called Camper Bazar, in Mohammadpur area. PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Kadamtoli, Rayerbazar, Doyaganj and Jurain.

Talking to this newspaper, a 29-year-old Uttara-based consumer said he collects drugs mostly from Station Road in Tongi. "It's a big hub for all kinds of drugs. It's safe too because police and locals there know me for long."

But the most convenient way is to

call drug dealers for "home delivery" over mobile phone. They provide it only to old and trusted users.

"The prices vary according to quality. Usually, a pill here [Uttara] costs between Tk 300 and Tk 1,200. They also supply 'crystal' [pure form of methamphetamine]. It costs three to four times the price of yaba, starting from Tk 2,000 a dose."

Methamphetamine and caffeine are the two key components of yaba. It makes people high and aggressive, and stay awake.

"Usually addicts need 'downer' to calm down and sleep. Hardcore addicts use injections or sleeping pill mixtures for that. Station Road is a good hub for these drugs," he added.

"Many agents of drug dealers are available at different spots. What you need to do is call them and set a meeting at a convenient place."

"On Station Road, a few pharmacies and some peddlers along the rail line sell these. Some of them [peddlers] are well-off but most of the agents are not."

He claimed he got a lot of support from police. "Corrupt policemen, including ASI [assistant sub-inspectors] and SI, delivered me drugs. Police know about these peddlers and dealers in both Uttara and Tongi."

Sometimes customers or small peddlers get caught but the trade continues, he added.

**'SO AVAILABLE'**

"All are connected with each other," said a Khilgaon-based user.

"If I call someone, he will bring the pills to my house or a nearby place. If he cannot manage the number of pills I need, he gives me another contact who can provide that."

"In Khilgaon area, yaba is now a lot cheaper than before. I buy a regular yaba pill for Tk 180-200. I have heard that yaba pills are sold online too. But I

three such Facebook pages.

They posted photos of yaba pills and smoking accessories with prices.

One of their advertisements read, "Yaba tablets are available for sale. Police are not a

Problem; they are our friend. We pay them every month. Feel free to contact us: extra charge of Tk 500 for home delivery anywhere in Dhaka city."

Another advertisement said, "Yaba pills at a wholesale price of Tk 180!!! If you need any, feel free to text us. You have to pay 50 percent of the price in advance. Text your address and we will send those to your home. You can also collect it yourself from Karwan Bazar or Tejuri Bazar."

In the comment section of the posts, several people showed interest in buying the pills. They requested the page admins to check their inboxes for making deals in private. Besides yaba, they also offer other narcotics such as weeds.

**A LOST BATTLE?**

"What is more worrying is that my brother often buys drugs from a policeman!" said a journalist whose younger brother is a yaba addict.

"My younger brother has been abusing this substance for 10-12 years. I have seen a bright boy from Rajuk Uttara School and College become a helpless human being ... We have sent him to rehab a few times but to no avail."

Expressing his anger and frustration, he questioned whether this is already a lost battle, and if there is no way out.

Biplob Kumar Sarker, deputy commissioner of Teigaon Division of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, believes it is impossible to tackle yaba menace unless smuggling into the country is stopped in the bordering areas.

Border Guard Bangladesh and Coast Guard have to play the leading role in it, he said, adding a consignment of yaba changes hands once it enters the country.

"We conduct raids at known spots regularly, but sometimes we have to shift priority depending on the situation. Yaba traders take advantage of it and resume their illicit trade," the DC told this newspaper.

According to him, around 90 per cent of the arrestees are yaba addicts, and it is hard to bring influential yaba traders to book as they never carry the contraband item.

Mentioning that some unscrupulous law enforcers are reportedly getting involved in yaba trade, the DC said police personnel must take "proper action" to stop the menace.

Contacted, Jamal Uddin Ahmed, director general of the Department of Narcotics Control, said, "We conduct raids on the hotspots and arrest drug traders from time to time. But the drug syndicate is so organised that they resume trade soon after the officials leave the spot."

"It will be better if we can engage some officials in keeping a round-the-clock watch on the spot."

[Also contributed by Md Shahnawaz Khan Chandan, Shaheen Mollah and Mahub Morshed]

## 'Untouchable' yaba lord of Bihari camp

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roadside. But in early 2004, he started working as a drug carrier and that changed his life.

In the following years, he built his own syndicate, got into transport business and started to carry yaba on trucks.

Now 32, he moves in personal cars and owns at least 50 trucks and buses and eight luxurious buildings in Dhaka's Mohammadpur, Uttara, Aminbazar and Ashulia.

He has over 100 bighas of land in Savar and Ashulia, where people mostly know him as Kamrul Islam, according to an investigation report by a law enforcement agency.

Ishtiaq is well known in Savar as he buys land from needy people by paying

them high prices, said locals.

Based on information from law enforcement sources, this correspondent visited one of Ishtiaq's houses on April 27. It is a seven-storey building near Berun Bus Stand of Ashulia, with a number of CCTV cameras installed in the front.

Neither Ishtiaq nor any of his family members could be found. Locals said the building owner is Kamrul Islam, a businessman who mostly stays abroad.

Ibrahim Dulal, a security guard, said he was appointed a month back but he never saw the owner. Sometimes, one or two policemen come to collect information about the owner.

Officials of the Department of Narcotics Control (DNC) claimed that

they failed to nab Ishtiaq as he kept changing places hiding identity. Besides, his houses are equipped with surveillance cameras and he stays alert to possible raids.

Khurshid Alam, assistant director of the DNC, told The Daily Star that Ishtiaq is one of the top yaba dealers in Dhaka. "We have conducted drives to arrest him a number of times but he always managed to flee noticing our presence through CCTV cameras."

The Daily Star obtained a video clip of a drive that DNC officials conducted at his Ashulia house on November 21 last year.

In the footage, one staff named Majhar said the owner left the house with all of his family members just half

an hour before the law enforcers came. All the staff know him as Kamrul Islam.

According to official sources, Ishtiaq built his empire in the last 14 to 12 years and eventually became the "yaba lord".

Yaba supplies in Mohammadpur, Gabtoli, Aminbazar, Beribadh, Hemayetpur and Ashulia are reportedly managed by Ishtiaq and his syndicate members, according to sources.

He often visits Cox's Bazar by air and resides in lavish hotels there. He is now reportedly trying to expand his network to India and Malaysia, investigators found.

Law enforcers said at least a hundred people work in Geneva camp under Ishtiaq's command. They run the

narcotics business being dividing into 10 separate units.

He is wanted in at least 15 separate cases, including that for possession of narcotics and murder, with Mohammadpur Police Station. Officials already submitted charge sheets against him in three narcotics cases.

Some of his top operatives are Nadim Hossain alias Pachis, Selim alias Chua alias Chora Selim and Molla Arshad.

Of them, 31-year-old Nadim runs yaba, heroin and cannabis trade on behalf of Ishtiaq. Born and brought up in Geneva camp, he earlier worked as a cleaner in a hotel.

As a teenager, he used to sell small

packets of cannabis at Tk 25 each. That's why people started calling him Pachis (twenty-five in English).

On November 3 last year, DNC officials in a joint drive with Rab, police and Armed Police Battalion (APBn) personnel arrested Pachis, but he managed to get bail within 12 days. He then went into hiding and law enforcers now have no clue as to his whereabouts.

Ishtiaq also hires women, mainly for carrying drugs, law enforcers said.

[Our Savar correspondent Akash Mahmud contributed to the report]