

TANGENTS

BY IHTISHAM KABIR



Beach front today, Cancun.

PHOTO: IHTISHAM KABIR

Cancun Once Again

In 1519 the Spaniard Hernan Cortes landed in Mexico. His band of adventurers defeated the Aztec king Montezuma, thus starting 300 years of Spanish rule. Before that, for hundreds of years, several native civilizations rose and fell in Mexico, and the nation proudly boasts that heritage wherever one looks.

In 1988, my wife and I, then living in Northern California, toured Mexico. We flew into Mexico City, a delightful mix of old and new. After exploring the vibrant city, we climbed the pyramids of Teotihuacan, built by the Aztecs between 200 and 100 B.C. outside the city.

We then proceeded to Oaxaca, capital of the eponymous province. It was, at that time, a small, sleepy town of distinctive old buildings with a charming central square. Oaxacan food we tried included mole - chicken cooked in a tangy sauce of chocolate beans - and their famous hot chocolate, Chocolate Guelaguetza. One day we took the bus up the mountains to the pre-Columbian ruins of Monte Alban, a city that around 300 B.C. had held a population of 5000. We marvelled at intricate structures built by people who had yet to use the wheel (but knew how to write.)

From Oaxaca we flew to Cancun for a few days on the beach. On the Yucatan peninsula in eastern Mexico, washed by the warm waters of the Caribbean Sea, this area had been an undeveloped jungle until 1978 when the Mexican government, reeling from an economic crisis and seeing the tourism potential of the region's stunning natural setting, started a development project there. From the start, Cancun became a favourite destination of tourists. Direct flights

from the United States and Canada to the small airport brought in tourists who frolicked in sun and sea before heading back to their colder home. Along a strip of white sand, twenty or thirty kilometres long, a handful of resort hotels housed and fed them.

To this day I recall the warm waters of the Caribbean thirty years ago and the sand, soft and white, that caressed my feet. We spent most of the daylight hours of our short stay in the water or on the beach.

After thirty years, we returned to Cancun last week. The small airport I remembered had become substantial. Inside the cavernous immigration area we waited with hundreds of other tourists who had arrived here on several flights. Thanks to an efficient system, the wait was relatively short.

Outside, my memories from thirty years ago were jarred by the new Cancun. The small road leading from the airport to the hotel zone was now a multi-lane highway. The number of giant, all-inclusive resorts had increased dramatically: Cancun now had three times as many hotel rooms as when we had visited. Thirty years ago we had been accosted repeatedly by salesmen selling timeshares. Today, they were replaced by shopping malls peddling expensive luxury brands of the world.

Luckily, the best part of Cancun had not changed. The soft white sand of the beach and the warm, turquoise waters of the Caribbean were as inviting as I recalled. And so, for the next two days, I spent many a blissful hour in the ocean, being beaten up by waves, playing with family, and feeling thirty years younger.

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Vegetable prices still not reflecting season

ARUN BIKASH DEY, Ctg

Winter is widely held as the season for vegetables. As supply of vegetables floods kitchen markets, prices come down drastically. But this year, the economics is yet to work out in Chattogram.

Contrary to expectations, most vegetables are still selling for over Tk 40 per kg, remaining out of reach of common people.

"Prices of vegetables remain high throughout the year except for winter. Lower-income people like us eagerly wait for this time to these delicacies, but the prices are yet to come within our reach this season," said Md Rashed, a rickshaw-puller in Chawkbazar Kitchen Market.

However, traders assured that as supplies keep increasing, prices will be going down.

"Supplies are coming in from southern Chattogram as well as many other districts and prices are expected to fall over time," Md Yasin, president of Karnaphuli Kitchen Market, told this correspondent.

Visits to Chawkbazar, Kazir Dewri, Bahaddarhat and Karnaphuli Kitchen markets yesterday confirmed this. The prices of vegetables have reduced in these markets in the last one week.

A kg of cauliflower sold at Tk 45-50 yesterday whereas it had been selling at Tk 55-60 last week, said traders and marketers. Price of cabbage also decreased, from Tk 45-50 last week to Tk 40 per kg yesterday.

A kg of brinjal sold at Tk 40-45 yesterday whereas it went for Tk 50-55 last week. Beans sold at Tk 60-65 per kg compared to Tk 70-80 last week. A kg of okra was sold at Tk 50-60 compared to Tk 70 last week.

Bitter gourd sold at Tk 65-70 per kg compared to Tk 80 last week. A kg of tomato went for Tk 90-100 compared to Tk 120 last week.

Manju Sawdagor, a wholesaler of city's Reazuddin Bazar, said prices would go down further in the days to come.

But this one week of price reduction are yet to appease consumers. "This is the only season when we buy vegetables without worrying about monthly budgets. But prices are still too high," said Sushanta Paul, a retired schoolteacher.

Illegal stone crushers destroying environment

Authorities yet to regulate sector following HC order

DWOHA CHOWDHURY, Sylhet

"Just a decade ago, this place was full of open lush paddy fields, but now, all that can be seen are piles of stones strewn across the land."

Al Amin Ahmed, a resident of Chalia area of Sylhet Sadar upazila, describes the current situation of a once green area near Sylhet-Bholaganj road. He has observed the transformation throughout the years as stone crushers increasingly invaded the land.

Right now, over a thousand stone crushers, the majority of which do not have proper permission and clearance from the authorities concerned, are being operated in six upazilas of Sylhet, destroying the surrounding environment. The administration is yet to take any adequate steps against them.

Stone or rock crushers are machines that are used to break down large stones into smaller pieces to be used for construction work. These machines are being operated in Sylhet Sadar, Dakshin Surma,



A stone crusher beside Kataganj river.

Companiganj, Gowainghat, Jaintiapur and Kanaighat upazilas.

To regulate their use "Stone Crusher Machine Establishing Rules 2006" provides information on what can and cannot be done. And the guideline clearly states crushers cannot be used without proper permission or licence. But a rulebook is of no use if it is not enforced.

In 2015, Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (Bela) filed a writ petition with the High Court. On January 24 in 2017, the court ordered to remove all illegal stone crushers, establish specific stone crushing zones and enforce the relevant rules within three months of the order.

Almost three years have gone by but the administration is yet to implement all the orders. All they managed to accomplish is select 133 acres of land in Gowainghat for crushing stones; just selected, the land is not being used as of yet.

During a recent visit to specific areas of the upazilas, this correspondent found them to be full of stone crushers, violating all rules, as if the HC orders were non-

existent.

In Sylhet Sadar, a huge part of the Surma riverbank is occupied by stone crushers in Dakshin Surma and Kanaighat. In Jaintiapur and Companiganj, stone crushers operate near highways, educational institutions, villages and in the banks of Dhalai, Kataganj and Sari rivers. Gowainghat's Jaflong is an ecologically critical area, but that didn't stop them from using crushers there as well.

"We have been operating these crushers for years and we pay all taxes accordingly," said Md Ajir Miah, a stone crushing mill owner at Chalia. "We keep the environmental risks in mind and try to abide by all instructions provided by the authorities."

The reality, however, tells a different story.

"Stone crushers beside the roads are harming our farmlands nearby. Moreover, children and elderly are suffering from respiratory diseases due to the dust," Al Amin said.

And it is not just Al Amin, locals all around echoed his complaints.

Contacted, Sylhet Civil Surgeon Dr Premananda Mandal said, "All forms of dust are very harmful for our health, especially for respiratory organs."

"If a worker deals with stone crushers for around five years, their lifespan will go down by 10 years," he said.

According to a study by Bela, there were 606 stone crushers, including 213 permitted ones, in 2015. The total number has crossed over a thousand in 2019 and is continuously increasing.

Contacted, Kazi Emdadul Islam, Sylhet's deputy commissioner, said, "It would be best if all kinds of stone extraction and crushing could be stopped permanently to protect Sylhet's environment."

"We have selected some land to create a stone crushing zone following the rules and orders, but the process of establishing a zone is yet to begin. We are hopeful to start the process soon," the DC said.

As far as the 133 acres of land is concerned, the supposed solution birthed a new issue as that land is adjacent to a protected forest.

Abdul Karim Kim, general secretary of Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (Bapa), said, "Many forest lands of the upazila [Gowainghat] are already grabbed by stone traders. If the stone crushing zone is set there, more land will be grabbed, threatening the forest."

In reply, the DC explained that acquiring that much land, that too in a suitable spot, is not an easy task, so this was the best

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Police wives to sell onion at Tk 45 per kg

Weeklong initiative starts today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

Police Nari Kalyan Samity (Punak), an association for welfare of the female members of police families, is going to sell onions at Tk 45 per kg for the next seven days starting today - with an aim to provide port city dwellers some respite from exorbitant prices of onion.

Onions are going to be sold on the premises of five police stations in the city for next seven days, said police officials.

Confirming the initiative, CMP Commissioner Mahbubor Rahman told The Daily Star, "Punak has taken an initiative to sell onions at Tk 45 per kg and sales points will be at five police stations -- Kotwali, EPZ, Khulshi, Chandgaon and Pathartali."

"Daily one tonne of onions will be sold under each police station, and law enforcers are assisting the initiative taken by Punak," he added. Asking about the sources of onions, the CMP boss said onions were bought from the markets and will be sold at subsidised price.

BHASHANI UNIV ADMISSION

80 students set to contest each seat

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Tangail

Admission tests for Mawlana Bhashani Science and Technology University (MBSTU), Tangail, started yesterday with some 80 students set to compete for each seat.

A total of 65,366 students have applied for 815 seats in 15 departments under four units for the 2019-2020 session.

The admission tests began yesterday with the A and B unit exams being held across 38 centres in the town, including the university campus. C and D unit exams are set to take place today.

Prof Mohammad Alauddin, vice-chancellor of MBSTU, visited the exam centres.

To check question paper leak, forgery, or any untoward incident, the university authorities and law enforcement agencies have taken strict measures, according to university sources.

Nat'l Judicial Conference today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The National Judicial Conference-2019 will be held today with an aim to discuss all relevant issues regarding the judiciary, including backlog of cases, digitisation, effective court administration and case management.

The Supreme Court has arranged the daylong event under the theme -- "Justice for Peace and Development".

It will be held at Bangabandhu International Conference Center in Dhaka, SC sources said.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will inaugurate the conference as the chief guest at 10am today.

Chief Justice Syed Mahmud Hossain will

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Cuet student missing for three days

Family claims he was picked up by DB

UNB, Ctg

Family members of a missing student of Chittagong University of Engineering and Technology have alleged that he was picked up by the members of Detective Branch (DB) from Naya Bazar area of Chattogram city on Tuesday.

Md Shahidul Islam Azad, a mechanical engineering student, has been missing for the last three days, they said.

Family members claimed that people identifying themselves as detectives picked Shahidul up in a microbus from Moushumi residential area of Naya Bazar around 9:30pm on Tuesday.

Shah Alam, Shahidul's father, alleged that although his son has been missing for three days, police stations and DB office have no information of him.

Alam also claimed that he was prevented from lodging a general diary initially; eventually he filed a GD on Wednesday afternoon. Shahidul's friends alleged that police did not cooperate with them.

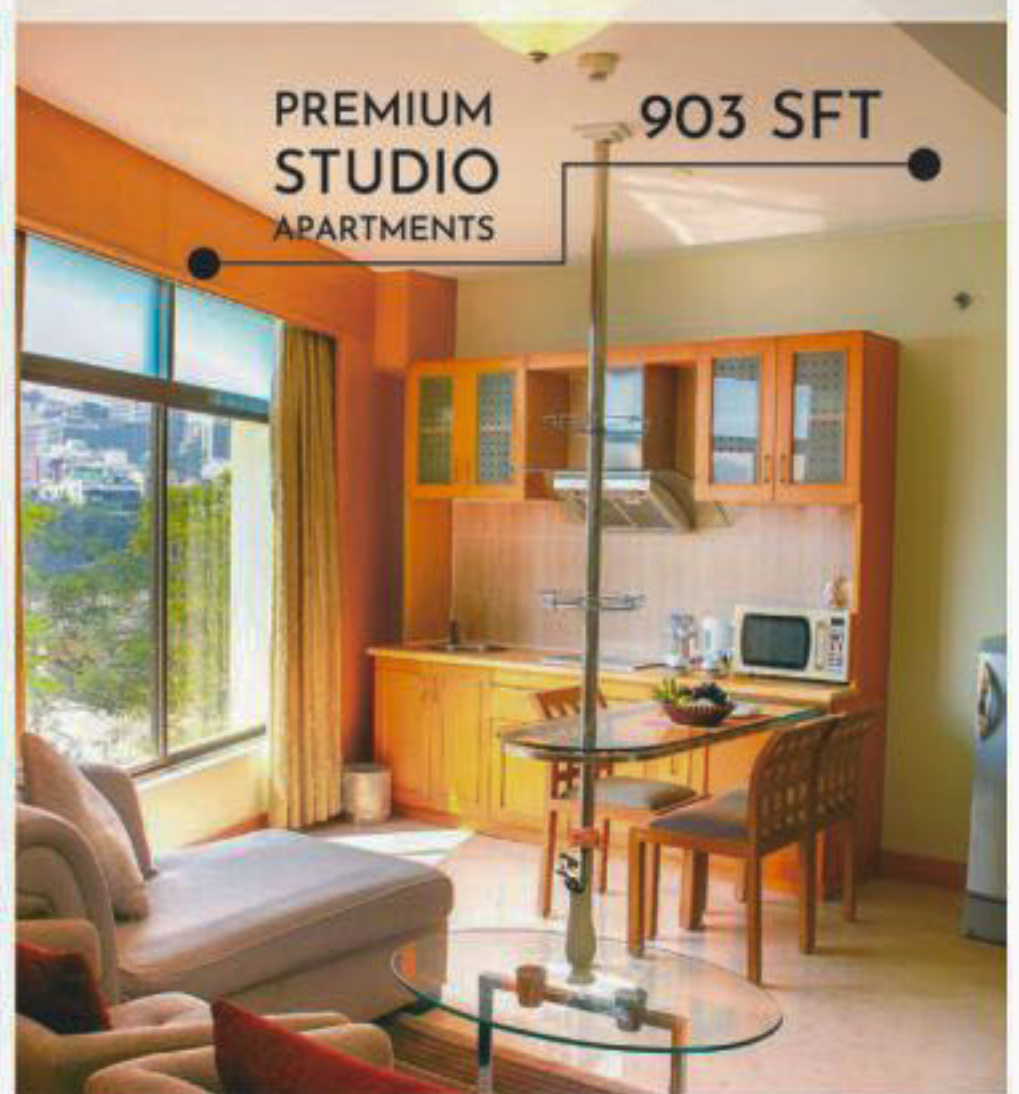
Md Mainur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Pahartali Police Station, said neither police nor detectives detained anyone of this name.

"We are looking into who picked up Shahidul. We are trying to locate his position using mobile tracking technology," he added.

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