



Tobacco growers prepare to use fertiliser at their field of Sarpukur village in Lalmonirhat's Aditmari upazila and inset, a farmer of Tupamai village in Nilphamari Sadar upazila spreads fertiliser at his tobacco field. Tobacco farmers often collect fertilisers at the government's subsidised rates, allegedly posing as growers of different food crops.

PHOTO: STAR

NILPHAMARI, LALMONIRHAT

Subsidised fertiliser used in tobacco fields as preventive mechanism absent

STAR COUNTRY DESK

A good portion of the government subsidised fertilisers, meant for producing different food crops, is going to the wrong hands -- growers of harmful tobacco in Nilphamari and Lalmonirhat districts.

Our Nilphamari Correspondent reports: The attempts by the government's health and agriculture departments and different NGOs to discourage tobacco cultivation proves hardly effective as subsidised fertiliser is often purchasable for tobacco farmers.

"Fertilizer traders in local markets welcome tobacco farmers like me as we pay ready cash for it. We can do so as we get interest-free loan from tobacco companies while poor farmers of other crops often buy it on condition of paying the price later," said Mominul Islam, 45, of Dogachhi village in Sadar upazila.

On the other hand, president of district's fertilizer association Abdul Wahed Sarker said, "Tobacco farmers often cheat us, saying that they would use the fertilizer for cultivating Boro or other crops. It is not possible to verify the fact, going door to door."

In the ongoing Rabi season from October to March, the Department of

Agricultural Extension (DAE) set a target of cultivation of Boro paddy, maize, potato, wheat and other crops on 1.50 lakh hectares of land, said Aref Rabbani, sub assistant agriculture officer in Nilphamari.

"To meet the requirement of fertilizer for recommended crops, the government allocates 13.5 thousand tonnes of chemical fertilizers like triple super phosphate, di-ammonium phosphate (DAP), murate of potas and nitrogenated urea," he said.

The government gives up to 50% subsidy for the fertilizers, which is never meant for tobacco farming, said Sirajul Islam, additional deputy director of district DAE.

Shahin Jahangir Alam, managing director of local NGO 'Camp' that conducts awareness campaigns regarding tobacco, said, "Tobacco is being cultivated on 3,005 hectares of land in the district this year, which is around 50 acres more than last year's. Availability of fertilizer is a main reason for cultivation of the harmful crop in such a vast area."

Sunil Roy, 60, a farmer of Jaldhaka upazila, said he and many others grow tobacco as they incurred repeated loss by cultivating other crops while tobacco price is always satisfactory.

Investigation by this correspondent found that several tobacco companies provide farmers with technical support and interest-free loan for buying fertilizer, insecticide and paying the labourers.

Contacted, DAE Deputy Director in Nilphamari Nikhil Chandra Biswas said, "We motivate tobacco farmers to replace it with useful crops and forbid fertilizer dealers to sell the item to tobacco farmers."

Our Lalmonirhat Correspondent reports: Government subsidized fertilizer, especially di-ammonium phosphate (DAP), is often used by tobacco farmers in the district.

During the last tobacco farming season, they had to buy the non-urea fertilizer at Tk 25 per kg but they are now buying it at the government fixed rate of Tk 16.

The subsidised rate helps tobacco farmers to save a portion of the cultivation cost as they have to use 100 to 120 kg of DAP for producing the item on a bigha, said farmers.

"The tobacco company concerned give us 10 to 15 kg of DAP fertilizer free of cost for farming the crop on each bigha of land. And we can buy the rest of the requirement, around 100 kg, for low price. I have cultivated tobacco on 12 bighas of land this season although it was nine bighas

in the last season," said Nazrul Islam, a farmer at Sarpukur village in Aditmari upazila.

"DAP fertilizer is a must to get a good yield of tobacco. Perhaps the government does not know that we are using it in large quantities for tobacco cultivation," said Shafer Ali, a tobacco farmer in the same village.

The decrease in DAP fertilizer price this year helps companies as well as farmers to save cost of tobacco production, said a representative of a multinational tobacco company at Aditmari upazila, on condition of anonymity.

Abdul Hakim, president of Lalmonirhat District Fertiliser Dealers Association, said, "We sell fertilizer at government fixed rates. It is difficult to understand whether a farmer coming to buy DAP is a tobacco grower."

Aditmari Upazila Agriculture Officer Ali Noor said they suggest farmers to avoid tobacco cultivation.

Officials of the Department of Agriculture Extension in Lalmonirhat said tobacco has been cultivated on 6,920 hectares of land in the district this year.

Stakeholders, however, said the actual area of its cultivation would be much more.

Murder accused killed by rivals

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Barishal

An accused in a murder case was killed in an attack allegedly by his rival men in Muladi upazila on Friday.

The deceased, Mokles Khan, 40, son of Mojammel Haque of Char Alimabad village, was an accused in a case filed for murdering one Prince of the village over a land dispute in March 2018, police said.

Later, Mokles went into hiding after securing bail from the court.

He returned to the village last month and started grocery business at local Mollarhat Bazar, Officer in Charge (OC) of Muladi Police Station Fayezuddin Ahmed said.

Quoting locals, the OC said, a rival gang led by Shahin Hawlader intercepted Mokles while he was going to offer his Jumma prayer at a local mosque around 1:30pm of Friday.

They hacked Mokles with sharp weapons and fled the spot, leaving him critically injured.

Being informed, police rescued injured Mokles from the spot after nearly two hours of the incident and sent him to Barishal Sher-E-Bangla Medical College Hospital (SBMCH).

He died at the hospital around 8:00pm due to bleeding profusely.

Police yesterday detained three women -- Ruma Begum, Shewly Begum and Nupur -- for their alleged involvement in helping the killers, the OC said, adding that a murder case was filed against 30 people including Shahin the same day.

BID TO RAPE THIRD GRADER

Madrasa teacher held

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Benapole

Police on Friday arrested a madrasa teacher in connection with a case for attempting to rape a Class III girl student of his institution in Jashore's Sharsha upazila on Thursday.

The arrestee is Sheikh Liaquat Ali, 40, son of late Yusuf Moral of Benekhari village.

Victim's mother said, Liaquat, an assistant teacher of a local madrasa, took her daughter to an empty classroom on Thursday afternoon and tried to rape her there when none of the employees or students were present at the institution compound.

Hearing her screams, people living nearby the madrasa rushed to the spot and rescued the girl.

The culprit, however, fled the scene before villagers could catch him, she added.

Following a case filed by the victim's mother with Sharsha Police Station the same day, police detained Liaquat from his house on Friday night, Officer in Charge (OC) of the police station Aatur Rahman said.

Meanwhile, police produced the arrestee before a Jashore court yesterday afternoon that sent him to jail, the OC added.

2 injured in gun attack

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Benapole

Two youths sustained critical bullet wounds when unidentified criminals opened fire on them in Jashore's Monirampur upazila early yesterday.

The injured, Monirul Islam, 35, and his brother-in-law Zahidul Islam, 25, of Sreepur village, were first taken to Monirampur Upazila Health Complex and then referred to Jashore General Hospital as their condition deteriorated.

Injured Monirul's brother Akhtar Hossain said the duo went to irrigate their land for Boro farming around 4:00am.

As they reached near the irrigation pump beside their cropland, a group of unidentified criminals opened fire on them in the dark, leaving them critically injured.

Monirul's father filed a case with Monirampur Police Station against 10 to 15 unidentified people in connection with the gun attack, Officer in Charge (OC) Rafiqul Islam of the police station said, adding that they were investigating the matter.

Long-lost Munni reunites with family after 33 years

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Natore

Munni Begum was seven years old when she went missing.

After 33 years, she was reunited with her family at Solaipara village in Bagatipara upazila on January 12 this year.

Munni is the daughter of Nazma Begum and late Munshir Ali, a farmer of the village. She is second among three siblings.

The 40-year-old woman is now mother of two sons. Her husband is a banker by profession.

Family members said Munni along with her parents went to visit her grandfather's house at Abdulpur Milkipara village in Lalpur upazila 33 years ago and remained missing from there. Family members searched for her in every possible place, but



failed to trace her.

A kind-hearted man then found the girl sitting alone beside Gopalpur School in Lalpur upazila. He later took her to Mahabuddin Ahmed Sadhu, chairman of Gopalpur union parishad.

The chairman named the girl Achia Khatun and raised her like his own daughter. He later married off her with a

man, a banker by profession. A few days ago, a close relative of Munni who lives in Lalpur found her after seeing the mole and burn scar on her right eyelid and right hand.

"I am very happy to find my family. There is no joy greater than this," said smiling Munni.

"Today I feel very happy to get my daughter back after 33 years," said Munni's mother.



A woman collects water directly from a pond in Bagerhat's Sangdia village under Kachua upazila as pure drinking water is no longer available ever since the pond's sand filter, seen behind her, went out of order.

PHOTO: STAR

Pure water without filtration device!

After money went down the drain on pond filters, more money would be spent to procure one lakh plastic water tanks -- without any filtration device -- for harvesting rainwater in coastal districts

PARITHA CHAKRABORTY, Bagerhat

A significant number of residents in six upazilas of coastal district Bagerhat -- where groundwater is unobtainable due to presence of high levels of arsenic and salinity -- are suffering from water-borne diseases this dry season as most pond sand filters (PSF) installed there have gone out of order.

However, the Department of Public Health Engineering (DPHE) said the government is now planning to solve the water crisis through harvesting of rainwater. And with that objective in mind, it is considering to distribute about one lakh plastic water tanks for people living in coastal districts including Bagerhat, Khulna and Satkhira.

Consumption of untreated water, harvested during the monsoon and from ponds, are primarily causing the illnesses in Bagerhat Sadar, Rampal, Mongla, Morrelganj, Sharankhola and Kachua upazilas, according to health professionals.

Pulak Debnath, acting civil surgeon in Bagerhat, said this winter, most of the infected people in these areas are suffering from water-borne diseases. After tropical cyclone Sidr swept through the

coastal districts in 2007, DPHE and different non-governmental organisations built 2,500 PSFs in all nine upazilas of Bagerhat as a means to solve the scarcity of drinking water, said locals.

But almost none of those are currently functional due to the absence of proper maintenance, they alleged.

They somehow get by during the rainy season when they collect rainwater, but scarcity of water turns acute after the rains stop, said Sandhya Das, a homemaker from Sangdia village in Kachua upazila.

During the dry season they either have to consume water collected directly from the ponds or spend Tk 35 to 40 for a 20-litre jar of "purified water" available at local stores.

Risking the consequences such as stomach-aches, vomiting and diarrhoea, most people, without finding any affordable option, are consuming pond water, she said, adding that it would be helpful if they were provided with reservoirs for harvesting rainwater that they would be able to consume during six months of the dry season.

Rickshaw-van puller Shahidul Sheikh, from the same village, said, "Since most of the PSFs are not functioning, I fetch water from one

and a half kilometres away. If I had a rainwater harvesting tank, the water collected in it would be good for about next six months."

Many others in Kachua upazila said thanks to arsenic and salinity in the area, installing deep tube wells is not an option. So, tanks for harvesting rainwater would somewhat solve their problem.

Contacted, SM Shamim Ahmed, DPHE executive engineer in Bagerhat, said to facilitate rainwater harvesting, the Planning Commission of the government is considering to distribute one lakh plastic water tanks in coastal districts including Bagerhat, Khulna and Satkhira.

The water crisis situation will be greatly resolved once the water tanks are distributed, he said, adding, "The 65 ponds already dug in the six upazilas of Bagerhat over the last two years" will also come in handy.

When asked whether the rainwater collected in the plastic water tanks would be safe for consumption for next six months without any filtration device attached to those, he claimed, "As long as the lids on the tanks are kept closed, the water inside will not come in contact with air and thus, the water will be safe for consumption."



This water bus, meant for carrying passengers to Kuakata tourist spot in Patuakhali's Kalapara from different areas in the coastal region including the Sundarbans, Char Bijo, Sonarchar, Fakirhat, Laldia, Fatraban, and Payra sea port, saw its maiden journey on Friday. Introduction of the fast moving watercraft, with the capacity to carry a hundred people, aims at encouraging more people to visit the picturesque areas, said Hossain Amir, initiator of the project.

PHOTO: SOHRABHOSSAIN