

A bleak Baishakh for restaurants

MOHAMMAD JAMIL KHAN and MAHBUBUR RAHMAN KHAN

Around 30,000 restaurants across the country were eagerly waiting for this year's Pahela Baishakh, expecting that they would get booming sales. But none of them could have imagined what would happen in the coming days.

Covid-19 has brought the whole country to a standstill, no celebrations, no hang outs, no nothing.

Like any other holiday, Pahela Baishakh normally sees people thronging restaurants and juice bars with their near and dear ones to celebrate.

But against the backdrop of rising infections and death toll, the government has prohibited all sorts of outdoor gatherings.

Restaurant owners and staffers are struggling to stay afloat in these trying times. The miseries that come when one's short of money to feed their family is often too much to bear.

"Staffers have gone to their homes after the shutdown, but recently they started reaching out to us, as they need money to survive," said Khandaker Ruhul Amin, president of Bangladesh Restaurant Owners Association.

"We are discouraging staffers to return to the capital," said Ruhul, also a director

of Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industries. "We're now making a list of staffers to extend some support."

Faisal Ahmed, owner of Faisal Juice Bar and Indian Food at the capital's Wari, has been operating the business for the last seven years.

Although Bangla New Year is only celebrated for one day, a huge number of customers visit restaurants for three to four days, he said.

"We always prepare for these special days round the year. This year, we bought Tk 50,000-60,000 worth of fruits, but now, we have no choice but to eat them ourselves. Some fruits were distributed among the staff and the shop has been completely closed for the shutdown," he added.

It's not just Faisal who is desperately trying to deal with the crisis. According to the association, some nine lakh people working at 30,000 restaurants, 8,000 of which are in Dhaka city alone, are all suffering.

"On last year's Pahela Baishakh, our sales shot up by nearly three times than the usual," said Md Sumonuzzaman, operation manager of Just Juice.

He said they have six outlets in Gulshan, SEE PAGE 4 COL 5



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Dhupkhola kitchen market's new home at the adjacent playground. Shops are spaced out to ensure there's enough room for shoppers to maintain social distancing. Inset, a recent photo shows the crowded situation that prevailed when the market operated on the roadside.



Old Dhaka Kitchen market relocated to playground

HELEMIUL ALAM

To ensure social distancing, the capital's Dhupkhola kitchen market -- which usually sits on the roadside -- was shifted to Dhupkhola playground on Sunday.

The initiative was jointly taken by the local police administration and army personnel.

Since the beginning of the coronavirus-induced shutdown, the kitchen market posed significant threat to maintaining social distancing in the area, as it was running on the narrow, busy road adjoining the playground.

The road is only 13 feet wide, which narrows down even further due to the makeshift shops, making commute extremely congested. This is why it was tough to maintain social distancing here, said Officer-in-Charge of Gendaria Police Station Md Shaju Miah.

SEE PAGE 4 COL 2

Brief JS session likely on Apr 18

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Duration of the upcoming seventh session of parliament is likely to be brief to avoid Covid-19 transmission, said sources at the parliament secretariat.

The session, scheduled to sit at 5pm on April 18, would be held for 30-40 minutes with special arrangements, and the least number of lawmakers required to fulfil the quorum would be asked to attend, they added.

The quorum requires the presence of at least 60 members.

Talking to The Daily Star, Chief Whip Noor-e-Alam Chowdhury said they were planning to make the session brief.

He, however, said the final decision regarding this would be made at the meeting of Jatiya Sangsad's Business Advisory Committee, the highest legislative body that determines the duration and businesses of the House.

Parliament secretariat officials said the session would end with a condolence motion on the demise of Shamsur Rahman, the AL lawmaker from Pabna-4.

No cheer for flower growers

MOHSIN MILON and MOSTAFA SHABUI

Pahela Baishakh celebrations are never complete without flowers. Be it for decoration, presenting a bouquet to someone special or gracing the hair of women and children alike, flowers are an indispensable part of the spirit of the festivities.

Not just revelers, the Bangla new year also brings joy to flower farmers who eagerly wait for the festival every year to sell their treasured cultivation and turn a profit.

But this year it's different due to the coronavirus outbreak. Growers are incurring huge losses amid the countrywide shutdown to prevent the spread of the virus.

Upon walking along the villages in Jashore and Bogura, one would find no dearth of colours in the stretches of land filled with rose, tuberose, marigold and gerbera. But one would also see flower growers sitting idly with blank looks on their faces.

Growers in Godkhali area of Jashore fear that they will incur a loss of around Tk 100 crore due to the ongoing

shutdown to prevent the spread of coronavirus. They said the number of buyers has fallen drastically this year.

The Godkhali market, which used to be abuzz with activities before the Bangla new year with traders buying flowers in large quantities to sell across the country, now wears a deserted look. Out of desperation, the growers are selling flowers as cattle feed.

Some 5,500 farmers cultivated flowers in around 6,000 hectares of land in Jhikargacha upazila of Jashore this year, according to Godkhali Flower Society. They said due to favourable weather, farmers got bumper production.

Usually, farmers and traders target major festivals to double their profit. But this year, most major events got cancelled held due to coronavirus.

"I cultivated rose on two and half bighas of land. But I cannot sell those. Now, I'm using those as cattle feed," said Shajahan Miah, a flower grower in Godkhali.

"I have to collect some 1,500 to 2,000 roses from the garden daily. If

I don't do so, they will go bad and damage my garden. I'm using those roses as cattle feed," he told this correspondent yesterday.

Flower trader Sher Ali of Panisara area said all growers and traders are in a dire state this year. "I hope the authorities concerned will help us in this situation."

Contacted, Abdur Rahim, president of Bangladesh Flower Society, said, "The wholesale flower market at Godkhali has been closed since March 24. As a result, growers cannot sell flowers. On the other hand, they cannot keep flowers in their garden as those will go bad and eventually damage the gardens. They are in a severe crisis and need help."

"We demand that the government arrange special incentives and loans for growers to cover up losses," he added.

BOGURA GROWERS FACE UNCERTAINTY

Meanwhile, growers in Bogura are not faring any better.

At least 300 commercial flower SEE PAGE 4 COL 5

Ensure food for the unemployed: Shujan

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The coronavirus outbreak in Bangladesh has not only put the lives and livelihoods of people at risk, it has also caused a surge in unemployment, with the informal sector taking the biggest hit. People with small businesses and labourers who relied on daily income barely have any savings to keep themselves afloat during this time, said civil society organisation Sushashoner Jonno Nagorik (Shujan).

"It is urgent to bring food to the poor people and save their lives. Our inadequate, corrupt, and inefficiently managed social security programmes cannot ensure food security of a large population of suddenly unemployed people," said the press release, signed by Shujan president M Hafizuddin Khan and secretary Dr Badiul Alam Majumder.

Considering the humanitarian reasons and in order to eliminate the current social unrest, the organisation demanded that lawmakers formulate and implement vigorous programmes immediately to ensure food security for the unemployed poor population.

According to Shujan, the shutdown is a huge dilemma for policymakers. On one hand, it must be enforced to contain the spread of the virus, while on the other, the shutdown is causing unemployment and food insecurity.

"It is a difficult decision that involves various scientific, economic, humanitarian and political considerations," said the press release.

Besides, in order to make informative policy decisions, Shujan also urged the authorities to conduct extensive tests across the country to understand the prevalence of coronavirus infection.

Relief looters to be dealt with strongly: Benazir

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

New Inspector General of Police Benazir Ahmed yesterday warned of stern action against those involved in misappropriation of relief goods during the coronavirus pandemic.

"We will not tolerate any misappropriation regarding relief. Strict action will be taken against those who will loot in the name of relief," said Benazir, also the outgoing Director General (DG) of Rapid Action Battalion (Rab).

He made the remarks from Rab headquarters, while addressing reporters through videoconference.

After serving five years and three months as Rab DG, he is expected to take over the charge of IGP tomorrow (April 15).

Benazir said, "Regrettably, even when the nation is battling the fallout of the coronavirus epidemic, we have seen that some are trying to plunder relief supplies. My clear message to them is that they will be dealt with a strong hand."

He called upon individuals and organisations to reach relief materials to doorsteps of people maintaining social

distancing. "You have to maintain social distancing strictly while conducting any relief activity or seek government organisations' assistance if needed."

Despite repeated calls by government to maintain physical distancing, many are violating it, he said.

Benazir said there is no scope to consider the government-announced countrywide general closure as a vacation, picnic or an opportunity to gossip at tea stalls.

In replay to a journalist's query about taking steps regarding recent robbery incidents in two medicine shops in Dhaka, Benazir said many people have become jobless due to the countrywide shutdown, which may create some social problems.

"As medicine shops have been allowed to remain open round the clock, those may become the target of miscreants. Criminals who were involved in the two incidents have already been arrested," he added.

Benazir further said, "Tomorrow (today) is the Bengali New Year. This year, the new year's mood is quite different. I wish everyone a Happy New Year and request to maintain social and physical distance."

Mosquito menace returns to Ctg

ARJUN BIKASH DEY, Ctg

As summer approaches, mosquitoes are becoming quite the headache for port city dwellers.

In many areas across the city, mosquitoes descend upon neighbourhoods every day after sunset. But these days, even during daytime, their numbers are so high that people are finding it hard to stay home.

Under normal circumstances, this would be less of a problem. But what makes this more problematic is the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and the lockdown strategy implemented to fight it.

"I cannot read in the evening as swarms of mosquitoes keep preying on me," said Shuvesha Ghosh, a resident of the city's Rahattar Pool area, adding, "I have tried aerosol, vapourisers and mosquito racket, but nothing seems to work."

Shuvesha said her family has been suffering from this for over a month. "The nuisance started at the end of February," she said. "I honestly don't know what the city



PHOTO: RAJIB RATHAN

All they needed was a bamboo pole filled with mud and water to create an ideal mosquito breeding ground. This photo was taken from Gate-2 area recently.

corporation is doing [to contain the situation]."

Ratna Raha, a retired schoolteacher from Jamal Khan area, said her family finds it hard to stay at home even during daytime due to incessant mosquito bites.

"We have given up after trying out

every kind of mosquito repellent," she said. "Dengue season is almost upon us and we don't know what's going to happen."

Abdul Aziz, a resident of Panchlaish Residential Area, said, "It's a well-known fact that mosquitoes lay eggs on trapped water, which can be found in

sewers and around garbage dumps, but we do not see any initiative from Chattogram City Corporation (CCC) to clean them up."

"CCC officials should regularly clean the drains and canals and spray medicine to destroy mosquito larvae and eggs," he said.

When the government has urged people to stay at home to prevent contamination of Covid-19, residents in the city cannot do so in peace due to mosquito nuisance, said many residents.

"The mayor urged officials to start spraying anti-mosquito medicine in the city at the end of March," Asad Haider, a resident of Bibir Hat area, said, adding, "but we have not seen any CCC staff come to our area to do that. The anti-mosquito drive should have started much earlier. Had CCC started it from mid-February, we would've been more at ease now."

In addition to all of this, as drainage works across the city are halted due to the Covid-19

SEE PAGE 4 COL 5

Ushering in Noboborsho online

Barishal cultural activists gear up for a different celebration

OUR CORRESPONDENT, BARISHAL

Cultural activists of Barishal city have arranged a Mangal Shobhajatra that fits the time. Adapting with the ongoing shutdown all over the country, the activists are taking the age-old tradition online this year.

"Thousands of people come together to celebrate the festival typically," said Roni Das, an organiser of the initiative, "But this year, it isn't possible to celebrate Bangla new year in the usual fashion, as it would put people under risk of infection."

"So we decided to celebrate in our own homes. Photos and videos will be uploaded on social media and that is how we will bring people together online to celebrate," he added.

Farjana Priya, another cultural activist, said she will come on Facebook live to recite poetry at 8am today.

People are also involving their children in this unique celebration, as the colourful festival is a favourite among little ones.

Prapti, a second-grader, said, "I'm sad that we can't go out to celebrate but I am making paper crafts to



PHOTO: TITU DAS

An artist affiliated with Charukala Barishal paints a banner for Mangal Shobhajatra, to be celebrated online this year amid the shutdown. The photo was taken yesterday from Barishal city's Bhatikhana area.

decorate the house and celebrate indoors."

Das Gupta Asis Kumar, advisor at Teachers' Association of Barishal

region said, "We are taking the celebration online through our page 'Charukala Barishal Official' on Facebook."

RELIEF IRREGULARITIES

Legal notice seeks mobile court drives

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A Supreme Court lawyer yesterday served a legal notice to the government requesting it to conduct mobile court to give exemplary punishment to those involved in irregularities in relief distribution and misappropriation of relief materials during the ongoing crisis due to coronavirus.

Advocate Md Moniruzzaman Lincoln sent the legal notice to the law and home secretaries through emails, asking them to take necessary steps to this effect in seven days.

He said in the legal notice that some dishonest people including local public representatives are reportedly misappropriating relief SEE PAGE 4 COL 6

RAMNA BATAMUL CARNAGE

Justice in legal tangle

ASHUTOSH SARKAR

Some legal tangles have caused an unusual delay in hearing and disposal of the 2001 sensational Ramna Batamul carnage case at the High Court for nearly six years, as two separate HC benches have refused to deal with them for different reasons.

Besides, the attorney general's office has not extensively taken any move for expeditious hearing of the case's death reference and appeals, considering that an expected judgement may not come from the HC as there are serious weaknesses in the investigation and lack of evidence and documents.

Attorney General Mahbubey Alam, however, told The Daily Star on Sunday that his office will take a step for hearing and disposing of the death reference and appeals of the case after the court reopens.

All the courts across the country including the Appellate and HC divisions of the Supreme Court are now on holidays due to the ongoing coronavirus outbreak.

The courts are scheduled to reopen on April 26. The attorney general said the hearing of the Ramna Batamul killing case might have been finished recently had the courts not gone into holidays.

He, however, refused to comment about

the case's merit and possible result.

Contacted, Deputy Attorney General Dr Md Bashir Ahmed said an HC bench led by Justice Krishna Debnath is scheduled to hold hearings on the death reference and appeals of the case.

Earlier, two separate HC benches had refused to hear the same matters for different reasons.

Attorney general's office sources said the investigation of the case was conducted carelessly during the regime of the then BNP-Jamat led alliance government. Also, the main accused Mufti Abdul Hannan has already been executed in connection with another criminal case.

There is no proper documents and evidence to prove the charges brought against the accused and therefore the state counsels are not all too serious about this case, said sources.

Contacted, Advocate SM Shahjahan, a defense lawyer of the case, could not say anything about the case proceedings.

If a lower court sentences any person to death, its judgement is examined by the HC through hearing arguments for confirmation of the death sentence. The case documents and judgement reaches as

SEE PAGE 4 COL 1