

BANGLADESH
UPDATE



2,139
New cases in 24hrs



4,34,472
Total cases



6,215
Deaths



3,51,146
Recoveries

GLOBAL
UPDATE



1,329,857
Deaths



55,178,450
Total cases

Individuals cannot own this land

HC says in verdict upholding govt decision to declare 13,000 acres in Sylhet as reserved forest

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court yesterday upheld a government decision that declared 13,000 acres of land in Sylhet's Jaintiapur and Gowainghat upazilas as reserved forest area.

Delivering the verdict on two writ petitions, the HC observed that the 13,000 acres is state property and cannot remain under the ownership of individuals.

The HC bench of Justice Zubayer Rahman Chowdhury and Justice Kazi Zinat Hoque through the verdict rejected the writ petitions challenging the legality of a gazette notification issued by the then government in 1985 declaring the 13,000 acres as reserved forest area.

Deputy Attorney General (DAG) Sheikh Saifuzzaman told The Daily Star that the 13,000 acres had been acquired after the Partition of India in 1947 and some of the land was allocated to refugees who had come to that area from Assam of India.

The then Bangladesh government in 1985 issued a gazette notification declaring the land as reserved forest area. The total land area is now under the forest department of the government.

Nineteen people, including Abdul Motaleb and Md Rafiqul Islam, had filed the two writ petitions with the HC in 2012 and 2014 challenging the legality of the 1985 gazette notification.

They claimed in their petitions that they were the Mohajer (refugees) from Assam and they owned the land.

The HC then issued two rules asking the government to explain why the gazette notification declaring the land as reserved forest area should not be declared illegal.

After holding hearing on the rules, the HC bench yesterday rejected the writ petitions as the petitioners could not prove that they were refugees and they could not produce any documents in support of their claim, DAG Saifuzzaman said.

Replying to a query, the DAG said the total land area is now under the possession of the forest department.

He, however, could not give details about the writ petitioners.

This newspaper could not reach the petitioners' lawyer Chowdhury Sanwar Ali for comment.

SM Sazzad Hossain, deputy conservator of forests and also the divisional forest officer in Sylhet, said, "Other than the self-claimed refugees, a large area of the land has been grabbed by stone crushers. Over the years, we have evicted many people from the area, but this type of cases [filed by the petitioners] makes our efforts difficult.

"Once we receive the High Court order, we will conduct drives to evict all occupiers from the area with the help of the district administration," he added.

A vacation in Dooars was his last wish

FROM PAGE 1

biopic played by Parambrata Chatterjee."

Soumitra was looking forward to spending some time close to nature once the Covid-19 restrictions would completely be lifted.

Not a fan of idle pleasure, the actor, however, was longing for a vacation this time. "He had even spoken about this to Horeram Kaku [Jungle], his friend, who owns a tea garden at Dooars," Poulami said.

"But that was not to be ... His last wish remains unfulfilled!"

Poulami said even in hospital, Soumitra wanted to keep writing. "Baba told me to keep a pen, paper and his spectacles beside his bed. He

said that he might get bored, so he should write a little too. But he could not pen a single word."

Poulami said she did not just lose her father, but the dearest friend and the most trustworthy comrade. "Baba taught me to enjoy life to the fullest. He would always tell me to never get upset in life, and focus on making our lives meaningful. He inspired us to make life worthwhile."

She said her father himself lived according to what he preached. "He lived a complete life and was seldom depressed."

She thanked everyone for showering Soumitra, who passed away on Sunday, with love.

Food reserve

FROM PAGE 1

purchase 6.8 lakh tonnes. Similarly, it bought 99,000 tonnes sun-burnt (atap) rice against the target of 1.5 lakh tonnes.

The food ministry had decided to buy two lakh tonnes of paddy from growers at Tk 26 per kg and six lakh tonnes of rice from millers at Tk 37 per kg.

The prices are lower than the agriculture ministry's estimate of the production cost of Tk 27.29 a kg for paddy and Tk 40.36 per kg for rice.

An increase in the rice distribution to provide food relief for the poor struck by the coronavirus pandemic and natural calamities, such as repeated floods, also contributed to bringing down the grain storage to the current level.

The government distributed 27.77 lakh tonnes of rice in the FY20, up from 25.94 lakh tonnes a year ago.

It is now facing a dilemma on how it would build up its food reserves.

On the one hand, it wants to see higher prices of paddy so that farmers get a fair return. On the other, it does not want the consumers to pay too much to buy food, said Agriculture Minister Muhammad Abdur Razzaque last month.

Consumers are already in trouble because of job and income losses in the fallout from the pandemic. The recent rise in general inflation, notably the food inflation, added to their woes.

Inflation rose to 6.44 percent in October, the highest in at least five years, driven by a hike in the food prices.

The food inflation rose sharply, climbing by 84 basis points to 7.34 percent, primarily due to the increase in the price of rice. It was 6.50 percent in September this year and 5.49 percent in October 2019, BBS data showed.

The average retail price of coarse rice was Tk 45 per kg in October, which was 32 percent higher than in last year, mentioned the Bangladesh part of a report published by the US Department of Agriculture on Thursday.

"Retail prices of milled rice are increasing irrespective of the category. Analysts attribute the increase in domestic prices to market speculation as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic," said the USDA.

The situation leaves the government with only one option: imports.

On October 28, a meeting of the Food Planning and Monitoring Committee (FPMC) chaired by Food Minister Sadhan Chandra Majumder instructed the ministry to take steps to import 2 lakh tonnes of rice immediately, said a source.

The agriculture minister said the government might need to import 5-6 lakh tonnes of rice, and a decision would be taken after the aman harvest, which is underway.

"Initially, an initiative has been taken

to import 2 lakh tonnes of rice," he said.

The procurement would be done at the state level, and the government would not reduce the duty on rice imports as the cut would boost imports.

Private importers have not brought in any rice in the last one year. There is 62 percent duty on rice imports, said Chitta Majumder, managing director of Mazumder Group of Industries.

The total import of food grains was 6.44 lakh tonnes in FY2019-20, out of which rice was only 4,000 tonnes.

The government would have to strengthen its reserves to carry out its food-based relief programme as well. It is, however, cautious about the relief programmes and is looking to sell more rice at subsidised rates through open market sales operations to support the poor.

The government may not be successful in its aman procurement target as well because it is again offering a rate that is lower than the production cost.

On October 28, the FMPC decided to retain the price of aman paddy at Tk 26 each kg, unchanged from last year.

Yesterday, Chitta Majumder said farmers have started to bring their just-harvested paddy to local markets.

The yield of aman paddy was lower this year than the previous years, and the prices of the grain are higher, he said.

The coarse grains called Gutiswama were selling at around Tk 1,080 per maund in Sherpur area of Bogura, up more than 50 percent from Tk 700 for the same category of the grain last year, he said.

The prices of medium and fine grains are also higher, said Chitta Majumder.

The government decided to raise the aman rice purchase target to 6 lakh tonnes, up from 3.8 lakh tonnes in the previous season and raised the price of rice to Tk 37 per kg from the previous year's Tk 36.

Last week, Food Secretary Mosammat Nazmanara Khanum, upon field visits, said there has been bumper aman production.

She had already visited four districts to take the stock of the production scenario.

"If the production is good, then we would not buy from abroad."

The secretary said the reserves came down as the food ministry could not achieve the procurement target. "We offered lower prices, whereas the market prices are higher."

The USDA report noted falling stocks of food grains in government warehouses, stating that replenishment of rice stocks through procurement was critical in stabilising the domestic market and ensuring the availability of food.



Carrying pedal-driven knife sharpeners, two men look for work as they hawk on a street in the capital's Basabo area. Some 40 such daily wage earners in Basabo have hardly found any work since the pandemic struck the country in March. On a usual day, they used to earn Tk 200-300 each. The photo was taken recently.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Mobile courts to start penalising within days

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Authority (BRTA) directed its mobile courts to intensify drives to ensure that people wear masks while travelling in public transport like buses and minibuses.

The BRTA will also request the Ministry of Road Transport and Bridges to write to the Energy and Mineral Resources Division for the introduction of "No mask, No Fuel system" at filling stations.

The decisions came at a BRTA meeting held on November 9 at the directives of the cabinet division, BRTA sources said yesterday.

The move came at a time when most transport workers and passenger do not care to use masks.

BRTA Chairman Nur Mohammad Mazumder said they already sent letters to the associations of transport owners and workers, asking them to make sure that all workers and passengers wear facemasks. Otherwise, no one would be allowed to board the vehicles, he warned.

"We've also instructed our executive

magistrates to intensify their mobile court drives in this regard," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

He said his office also sent letters to all of their divisional and district level offices to ensure the "No Mask, No Service" policy.

THE CABINET MEET

The cabinet yesterday approved the Bangla and English drafts of the National Financial Inclusion Strategy, a proposal to ratify draft "Agreement on Cooperation and Mutual Assistance in Customs Matters between Bangladesh and Turkey", and the Bangla and English drafts on "National Nuclear and Radiological Emergency Preparedness and Response plan".

"The plan has been taken up for the Rooppur Power Plant. ... There is a requirement of the International Atomic Energy Commission for preparing safety guidelines and response plan before the plant operation. Otherwise, they will not allow it to open," said the secretary.

"The guideline is prepared according to the structure of IAEA," he said.

Talks essential for viable solution

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guarantee of citizenship, freedom of movement and other basic rights in Myanmar's Rakhine State.

Though Myanmar faces a genocide case at the International Court of Justice, the UN Security Council has yet to take any concrete measure.

Another conflict in Rakhine, Shan, Kachin and Chin states between Arakan Army and Myanmar military has escalated in the recent months.

Experts see these as threats to regional stability and development.

Meanwhile, Myanmar held its national elections on November 8.

Japanese envoy Naoki has a strong hope that the repatriation process will begin soon after the polls, but for that, the dialogue between Myanmar and Bangladesh needs to go on.

The meeting of Joint Working Group -- comprised of Bangladesh and Myanmar officials -- has not been held since May last year.

He said Myanmar was busy with elections and other domestic issues before the polls and that it would be flexible after the elections in terms of addressing the Rohingya crisis. Also, they will have the new mandate to settle the pending issues affecting the country.

Japan can play its role in whatever way required, the diplomat said, adding, "We are happy to be part of the dialogue if two parties want. We can provide humanitarian assistance and help create other environment that is conducive for repatriation."

Asked for comments that Japan,

a major investor in Myanmar, faces criticism for not doing enough to pressurise Myanmar, Naoki said Japan sent a message directly to the very high level of the Myanmar government.

Following Japan's former prime minister Shinzo Abe's talk to his Bangladesh counterpart Sheikh Hasina in August, its foreign minister Toshimitsu Motegi visited Myanmar, met its State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and Myanmar Armed Forces Commander in Chief Min Aung Hlaing to give a clear message that Japan wants early repatriation and enforcement of ICJ provisional measures.

Japan took the same stance on resolving the Rohingya crisis when Suu Kyi and Min Aung Hlaing visited Tokyo in October last year, he said, adding, "As far as I am aware, Japan is the only country that does this, making use of the channel it has due to its traditional relationship with Myanmar."

Naoki said Japan will also continue to provide humanitarian assistance, noting that over the last three years Japan's contribution is \$123 million.

Stating that free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) focuses on five areas -- humanitarian assistance, disaster prevention, quality infrastructure, connectivity and freedom of navigation, he said addressing the Rohingya crisis is part of FOIP.

Building connectivity and promoting trade and economy between Bangladesh and Myanmar can help solve much of the problem, the Japanese envoy said.

In 2012, Myanmar and Bangladesh

came up with a memorandum of understanding on road and rail connectivity. The two countries can resume the dialogue, he said.

"It may seem unrealistic, but unless you can do that, I don't see a long-term solution or stability of the Rohingya situation. Dialogue is a must for that," Naoki said.

Asked about Quad security dialogue held among the foreign ministers of Japan, Australia, India and the US in Tokyo -- an initiative that generated concerns that a new alliance was in the offing amid escalating US-China tension over trade and India-China strain over border, the Japanese ambassador said Quad is not a military alliance meant to defend the country or region as a group.

"So, we are not asking Bangladesh to be part of a military ally, but we are saying that we should build together free and open Indo-Pacific under the common vision with the shared values."

He said even though currently these four countries are participating in a maritime exercise in Malabar, the Bay of Bengal, they are not military alliance. Similarly, the US and Bangladesh, which are doing naval exercise, are not military allies.

However, it is important to do a joint naval exercise for this region's stability.

"I really see that Bangladesh can subscribe to those shared values ... because that's a common goal of prosperity, stability and development for the country and the Bay of Bengal region in the Indo-Pacific."

Shakib denies inaugurating Kali Puja

STAR REPORT

Bangladesh cricketer Shakib Al Hasan in a video on his YouTube channel yesterday denied that he had inaugurated a Kali Puja mandap on his recent trip to Kolkata.

Shakib went to Kolkata last Thursday for business purposes and was then pictured at a Kali Puja festival in Kolkata's Kakurgachi area.

Rumours then started circulating on social media that Shakib had inaugurated the puja, and that drew some backlash. The most extreme reaction came from a Facebook live video early Sunday morning by a Sylhet user brandishing a sharp weapon and saying Shakib must be killed for "hurting Muslims' feelings".

Yesterday evening in the video on his YouTube channel, Shakib said he had attended a programme adjacent to the venue of the puja and he had to get past the mandap in order to get into his car. He explained that he had been invited to take a picture, which was now being taken out of context.

"The place where we had our gathering was definitely not the puja mandap, it was an adjacent stage. I was there for 30-40 minutes and we did not speak about religion at the time. When we had concluded, I had to get in the car but some of the roads were closed.

"So, I had to take the road through the mandap and I did that. Then the person who invited me made a request, so I lit a candle. Because I have played for Kolkata [Knight Riders in the IPL] for a long time, their journalists were very excited. So, because of everyone's request, I stood there and took a picture," Shakib said in the video, and went as far as reading the part of his invitation card that mentioned the name of the man who actually inaugurated the puja.

"I would like to first say that I am a proud Muslim. I was at our programme and I want to say again that we did not talk about religion. Those two minutes at the mandap are now being shown. As a practising Muslim, I would never take part in the puja.

"If you think that my going there was wrong, then I am very sad and apologetic and I hope you can forgive it and I will try not to repeat such things in the future," Shakib said in the video.

Meanwhile, police in Sylhet are looking for the man who threatened to kill Shakib in a Facebook live video posted at 12:07am on Sunday.

BM Ashraf Ullah, additional deputy commissioner (media relations) of Sylhet Metropolitan Police, said, "We just got the video link and forwarded it over to the cyber forensic unit. We are looking for the man and he will be dealt with according to law."

BNP activists

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government will earn a bad name by setting fire to buses. Besides, it is our duty to ensure people's security."

Thanks to the technological advancement, those who are setting fire are being caught red-handed as there are CCTVs in all places. It is clear who were behind the attack, Hasina said, adding that there are images of the culprits in her hand.

Several persons from their procession were seen setting fire to buses with a gas lighter, she went on.

Noting that now technology is advancing far and technology speaks, the PM played the record of a phone call conversation between a leader and a female activist of BNP in the House.

Hasina said it is their old habit that they shift blame on the government after arson. Because there was a problem in the party's foundation.

The PM said the party lost public confidence as it made a fugitive convict of a murder and 10-truck arms haul case its acting chairman.

Hasina said the BNP was trying to get political mileage banking on the trying times of Covid-19 and to give the government a bad name.

Pointing at BNP MP Harunur Rashid, the PM said he should have raised the issue in parliament after knowing his party's information better.

She asked him not to mislead people by raising untrue information in the House anymore.

About the BNP's participation in the elections, Hasina said, "My question is whether they are taking part in the elections at all."

She added that BNP candidates do not campaign or even provide polling agents after securing nominations. They do nothing for the election and at one stage, they withdrawal from the race, saying that the election is not held properly.

She advised the BNP to take the polls seriously.

Earlier, speaking on a point of order, Harunur Rashid from Chapainawabganj-3 demanded that the Speaker form a parliamentary committee, comprising of treasury and opposition lawmakers, to reveal who were behind the arson attack.

"[Speaker] set the terms and conditions, we will complete the work in seven days. It should be revealed who were behind the incident and this should be placed before the nation," he said.

He said the BNP does not want to trade blame over the incident.

He said, "Police are saying that actions will be taken after examining video footage [of the incident]. But I want to tell you that Ishraq Hossain [BNP Mayoral candidate for Dhaka South City Corporation], Jewel [Swedchhasebak Dal leader] are infected with Covid-19 [whose names are included in the case]," Harun said.