

Alternative crops ignite

FROM PAGE 12
Khulna, and 72 percent in Barguna are affected by salinity.

In a study by the government in 2009, salinity-affected areas increased to 1.05 million hectares from the 0.83 hectares found in the previous government study in 1973.

The 2007 report of the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (IPCC) said rice production in Bangladesh may fall by 10 percent and wheat production by 30 percent by 2050.

But seawater intrusion into the country's river system seems to be leaving an impact on the coastal region that is much worse than forecast by the IPCC.

While farmers in other parts of the country are cultivating up to four crops a year, farmers in the coastal region are hardly able to cultivate a single one.

"Twenty-five percent of the country's arable land is in the coastal area, which has become saline. In most of the saline-prone areas, either people do shrimp farming or cultivate transplanted Aman rice. But now we are encouraging farmers to cultivate saline-tolerant alternative crops if they cannot grow rice," said Agriculture Minister Muhammad Abdul Razzaq.

"In a country with only 10 decimal agricultural land per capita, you will find miles after miles of barren land in the coastal area, and that is a major setback for the country," the minister said.

But the country is gradually trying to adapt to the situation.

Scientists from Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI) have developed some rice varieties that can be cultivated in saline-prone areas.

"Our scientists have developed BRRI 67, a saline tolerant variety which will be very successful," the minister said.

Along with this saline tolerant variety, the minister said, "We will encourage them [local farmers] to cultivate alternative crops".

People from Patuakhali did not know how to cultivate mung beans. But for the last few years, they have been cultivating mung beans, a very good alternative crop, the minister said.

Local agricultural offices in coastal districts have taken some initiatives of farming alternative crops, the minister said.

"Once the pandemic is over, we will take up a special programme to encourage alternative crop farming along with saline tolerant rice varieties," the minister said.

WATERMELON AND VEGETABLES BRING NEW HOPE

Kamal Bawali of Bhulbaria village under Khulna's Dumuria upazila, a saline-prone area, used to cultivate Aman paddy on his two bighas of land. But he hardly made any profit due to the low yield of local Aman variety.

But Kamal's fate changed last year as he and a few other farmers received preliminary training and guidelines from a local agriculture officer on how to cultivate crops in saline-prone areas.

After learning the method last year, Kamal cultivated watermelon

on his land. He grew around 800 watermelons on one bigha. This year he cultivated even more on a total of five bighas of land.

He spent Tk 56,000 to cultivate watermelons. In a bumper harvest, he earned a profit of around Tk 3 lakh from watermelons this year.

Rabiul Islam Robi, union parishad chairman of Sharifpur of Dumuria, told The Daily Star that people of the region used to put all their hopes on salt-water shrimp (bagda) farming.

Farmers had tried to grow vegetables and sowed seeds many times, but it used to be damaged due to the effect of saline water and it was not possible to produce vegetables or other crops here, he said.

But now, farmers are growing watermelons, wheat, maize, and winter vegetables from their land using rainwater.

Many people migrated from the area as they lost their livelihoods. But now the method of digging small ponds to preserve fresh water for irrigation to produce vegetables or other crops have raised hopes in Dumuria, Batiaghata, Dacope, Paikgacha upazilas of Khulna district over the last couple of years, the UP chairman added.

THE FARMING METHOD

Farmers store rainwater by digging small ponds in a portion of their land for irrigation of crops. Later they apply potash, gypsum and organic fertiliser on the land as per the rules taught by agricultural officials to grow crops.

Using this method, thousands of farmers in saline-prone areas of Khulna have revolutionised agriculture, said GM A Gafur, additional director of Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) of Khulna region.

Mosaddék Hossain, Dumuria upazila agriculture officer, told The Daily Star that all of Magurkhali union and many parts of Sharafpur and Shobhana unions were once saline-prone areas fit only for shrimp cultivation.

"Using freshwater from rainwater and using 20 kgs of potash, 15 kgs of gypsum and organic fertilisers, farmers are now producing multiple crops," he added.

This has brought a radical change among farmers. They are now cultivating Aman, Aush, corn, watermelon, potato, onion, eggplant, gourd, tomato, pumpkin, bean, long bean, red amaranth, cauliflower, gourd, radish, etc.

According to the DAE, about 6,000 tonnes of vegetables are being produced in just these three unions. In the last three and a half years, 2,500 hectares of land -- 75 percent of cultivable land -- has come under agricultural cultivation in the unions through a joint venture of farmers and the Department of Agriculture.

Officially, 2,000 farmers are being trained in saline-prone areas. DoA are also providing seeds to those farmers at free of cost.

[Our Barishal correspondent also contributed for the story]

Cops to make list of factories

FROM PAGE 12
intelligence surveillance, especially after five people were killed in police firing of an under-construction coal-fired power plant in Chattogram's Banskhali recently over labour unrest.

Mahabubor Rahman, additional inspector general of Industrial Police, told The Daily Star yesterday, "We have already held meetings with superintendents of Industrial Police who are on duty in Gazipur, Dhaka, and Narayanganj."

"We have collected information of industrial zones from the field-level officials and also made a list of the factories which could not pay salaries of March," he said.

Analysing the information, superintendents of Industrial Police concerned have already been instructed to increase intelligence vigilance and collect information of such factories to make an assessment about possible unrest, he said.

"We will hold meetings with the BGMEA, workers, and owners of the factories after collecting information. Besides, measures have also been taken to coordinate with workers and owners of the factories to avoid all kinds of unwanted incidents," the Industrial Police chief added.

Sources said a committee will be formed with the representatives of employer and worker organisations, police and the government to clear the salaries and bonuses before Eid.

A high official of Gazipur Industrial Police said the state of a number of factories there was not good due to the pandemic. If the salaries and bonuses are not paid timely, employees of the factories would definitely protest and take to the streets, said the official, requesting anonymity.

In Chattogram, the Department of Labour and Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments in a survey came up with a list of 67 factories that might experience labour unrest before Eid.

Around 20,000 people work in those factories.

The government has formed a crisis committee consisting the representatives of Department of Labour, Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments, BGMEA, Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers

and Exporters Association and labour organisations to oversee the situation in the factories ahead of Eid.

The committee started visiting factories from April 13 and already inspected 10 factories until yesterday.

Mohammad Nasir Uddin, convener of the committee, also director of divisional labour office, Chattogram, told this paper that they have started inspecting the factories with two teams.

They were coordinating with owners, he said.

Fazlul Kabir Mintu, president of Bangladesh Apparel Workers Trade Union, Chattogram chapter, said the law itself created scope for depriving workers of their bonuses, leaving it on the whims of owners.

"For the first time in 2015, the government formulated a regulation under the Labour Law-2006. The regulation says festival bonuses of workers would not be more than their basic wage. But if it is less than the basic wage, it is not made clear in the regulation how small amount the workers will get," he said.

He said this vagueness created a scope for the owners to deprive workers, which sometimes leads to unrest ahead of festivals.

Sharif Ahmed Azad, assistant deputy inspector general of Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments, told this newspaper that sometimes owners on the pretext of pandemic try to deprive workers.

"So, we are working to make sure that no factory owners get away with such intention," he said.

Faruque Hassan, president of BGMEA, told The Daily Star yesterday that there were some vulnerable factories, which are not capable of paying salaries and bonuses of workers, as they were facing financial crisis due to cancellation of orders.

"Eleven teams of BGMEA are working to identify these factories. We may be able to say clearly about the number of vulnerable factories after our work," he said.

Faruque added that they have already requested the government to keep giving incentives to garment factories and banks to provide financial support so that the workers' salaries and bonuses could be paid on time.



Activists of environmental campaign group Extinction Rebellion march with pink wheelbarrows to dump heaps of cow manure at the entrance to the White House on Earth Day to protest President Biden's climate plan in Washington, US yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Earnings of low-income people drop

FROM PAGE 12
the price hike of essential products on the food intake of low-income people, from a webinar.

The income of about 66 percent of the people in low-income groups has reduced, Senior Research Fellow of Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies Nazneen Ahmed said while presenting the research, which was done between March 25 to April 6. It interviewed 70 people from low-income groups in Dhaka, Dinajpur, Faridpur, Jhenaidah, Meherpur, Mymensingh and Sirajganj.

The research said that about 27 percent of the respondents said they take food twice a day and 32 percent of them said that there was no presence of animal protein (fish/meat/egg) in their daily meals.

Of the respondents, 37 percent said they took loans, 17 percent decreased family expenses, and 10 percent are

living hand-to-mouth, to manage their families at the moment.

The study said that the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) showed that the inflation rate increased by 0.15 percentage points in March from that of 5.32 percent in February.

Both the food and non-food inflation rates increased in March compared to the previous month.

The food inflation increased by 0.09 percentage points to 5.51 per cent in the last month from 5.42 percent in February.

The non-food inflation also increased slightly by 0.22 percentage points to 5.39 per cent in March from 5.17 percent in the previous month.

The inflation in rural areas rose at a higher rate than that of the urban areas, it said.

The research recommended ensuring food security for all citizens and expanding open market sales for

the next one year. They also said there should be some permanent area-wise open market sale stores. The Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) should expand its selling capacity and rich people should stop panic-purchasing.

Commerce Minister Tipu Munshi, at the programme, said that the country is witnessing an abnormal situation. The prices of essentials increased and people are losing their daily income.

The government is working to reduce the prices of essentials, he said, adding that they are trying to increase the open market sales through the TCB.

Dhaka University Professor Sayema Haque Bidisha, also research director of the South Asian Network on Economic Modelling (Sanem), Consumer Association of Bangladesh Vice President SM Nazer Hossain, among others spoke at the programme.

India sets record in daily Covid infections

FROM PAGE 12
India's cumulative toll to 184,657, according to the health ministry data. The previous record rise in cases was in the United States, which had 297,430 new cases on one day in January, though its infection rate has since fallen sharply.

Late Wednesday the Delhi High Court ordered the government to ensure safe passage of oxygen supplies from factories to hospitals across India.

Recent months have seen mass gatherings in India, including millions attending the Kumbh Mela religious festival, political rallies, lavish weddings and cricket matches with spectators.

"The government has been caught with its pants down," call centre executive Navneet Singh, 38, told AFP. 'INDIA WEEPS'

Television showed images of people with empty oxygen cylinders crowding refilling facilities, hoping to save relatives in hospital.

In the western city of Ahmedabad, a man strapped to an oxygen cylinder lay in the back of a car outside a hospital as he waited for a bed.

"Helplessness," tweeted former foreign secretary Nirupama Menon Rao. "India weeps."

Only a tiny fraction of the Indian population has received a vaccination.

Authorities have announced vaccines will be available to anyone over 18 from May 1, but experts say there will not be enough for the 600 million people who will become eligible.

Health experts say India let its guard down during the winter, when daily cases were about 10,000 and seemed to be under control, and lifted restrictions to allow big gatherings.

A YouTube stream showed a hundred or more supporters attended Interior Minister Amit Shah's election rally in Harirampur yesterday.

"We are dying here, and they are holding rallies there," one woman in the northern city of Lucknow said on television.

New, more infectious variants of the virus, in particular a "double mutant" variant that originated in India, have helped accelerate the surge, but many also blame the politicians, reports Reuters.

US VACCINE DRIVE

President Joe Biden on Wednesday hailed his government's "stunning" achievement in administering 200 million Covid-19 vaccine shots across the United States ahead of schedule.

Biden said the landmark had been reached a week before he hits his administration's 100-day mark -- the deadline he'd announced for meeting the 200 million doses challenge.

The US State Department has added at least 116 countries this week to its "Level Four: Do Not Travel" advisory list, putting the UK, Canada, France, Israel, Mexico, Germany and others on the list, citing a "very high level of Covid-19."

Most Americans already had been prevented from traveling to much of Europe because of Covid-19 restrictions. Washington has barred nearly all non-US citizens who have recently been in most of Europe, China, Brazil, Iran, India and South Africa.

At least 3,060,859 people have died of Covid-19 around the world since the outbreak emerged in China in December 2019, according to a tally from official sources compiled by AFP yesterday.

Mujibnagar cabinet meets

FROM PAGE 12
places in the eastern and western front. These officers have remained cut off from each other for over 25 days as broken communications could not be restored. In absence of instructions from the authorities, these officers had become virtually crippled and ineffectual. This is why they had been invited to the meetings, where their tasks in the changed situation would be defined.

Earlier in a press release, the Mujibnagar Government appealed to supporters of Bangladesh to report to 9, Circus Avenue, where the first Bangladesh mission is housed, with aid and supply.

PAKISTAN COMMITTED AGGRESSION: BRITISH MP

Bruce Douglas-Mann, British Labour MP, told a press conference today that West Pakistan had committed aggression on Bangladesh, that Pakistan would never be one again, and Bangladesh would emerge independent. He advocated economic sanctions by the United Nations and Commonwealth to force West Pakistan to stop the war.

Douglas-Mann was in Calcutta to meet representatives from the Bangladesh government, visit refugee camps and investigate the danger of famine in Bangladesh. The British MP said a committee had been

formed in London on April 18, 1971 to help restore peace and justice in Bangladesh. The committee would press the British government to express its deep concern over the repressive measures taken by the Pakistani government in Bangladesh.

Douglas-Mann visited four refugee camps on the border. After the visit he said that by talking to refugees from Bangladesh he had gathered evidence of the atrocities perpetrated by the Pakistan army. People had been killed indiscriminately. There was panic in the air.

Shamsuddoza Sajen is a journalist and researcher. He can be contacted at sajen1986@gmail.com

China warns of 'serious harm' to relations as Australia scraps BRI deal

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday said Australia's sudden scrapping of a Belt and Road Initiative deal risked "serious harm" to relations and warned of retaliatory actions, but Canberra insisted it would not be bullied.

The federal government pulled the deal with Victoria state late Wednesday in a move justified by the defence minister as necessary to prevent Australia hosting a giant infrastructure scheme "used for propaganda".

Australia overruled the state's decision to join the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) -- the flagship of President Xi Jinping's geostrategic vision for the Asia-Pacific region -- by saying the agreement was inconsistent with Australia's foreign policy.

As relations nosedive -- following

spats over the origins of the coronavirus and Canberra's blocking of Chinese telecoms giant Huawei -- Defence Minister Peter Dutton said Canberra was "worried" about local governments entering into such agreements with Beijing.

"We can't allow these sort of compacts... to pop up because they're used for propaganda reasons and we're just not going to allow that to happen," he told local radio.

Dutton said the government's problem was not with the Chinese people but rather "the values or virtues or the outlook of the Chinese Communist Party".

Australia last year enacted new powers -- widely seen as targeting China -- that allow it to scrap any agreements between state authorities and foreign countries deemed to

threaten the national interest.

Canberra's first target was the BRI, a vast network of investments that critics say is cover for Beijing to create geopolitical and financial leverage.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison said the decision "followed through" on his government's pledge to ensure Australia had a consistent foreign policy which strives for a "world that seeks a balance in favour of freedom".

The schism between Australia and its largest export market widened yesterday as Beijing railed at the abrupt cancellation and warned it would damage trust between the two countries.

The move "has poisoned mutual trust... and seriously harms China-Australia relations", said foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin at a briefing in Beijing.

BNP seeks

FROM PAGE 12
had said that the media distorted his statement on the disappearance of former BNP lawmaker M Ilias Ali.

Mirza Abbas, while attending a virtual programme, had said that someone from the BNP was involved in the disappearance.

He also urged the party's secretary general to find those involved in the incident.

However, after the statement was published in several media outlets, the BNP leader held a press conference at his residence in Dhaka's Shahjahanpur area and claimed that the media only presented a partial statement.

"Quoting me, a newspaper published that someone from the BNP is involved in the disappearance of former BNP lawmaker M Ilias Ali. Can anyone prove it? Impossible... I want to say it clearly that my statement was distorted," he had said in the briefing.

"The newspaper also said, the government and the ruling Awami League were not involved in the disappearance of Ilias Ali. I did not say this. It was twisted," he added.

Khulna court

FROM PAGE 12
Khulna court sent him to jail.

In Joypurhat, a court yesterday sent Md Amanullah Aman to jail in the other DSA case.

The 19-year-old accused is a resident of Moddhopara village in Kalai upazila.

Police said a local Chhatra League leader recently in a Facebook post welcomed the arrests of some Hefajat-e-Islam leaders.

Later, Amanullah made "derogatory" comments about the prime minister under the Facebook post. The matter went viral on social media.

On Wednesday afternoon, Kalai municipality ward Councillor Towfikul Islam Touhid, also the convener of upzila Chhatra League, filed the case against Amanullah.

The accused was arrested from Matrai Bazar area of the upazila within hours, said Salim Malik, officer-in-charge of Kalai Police Station.

[Our correspondents in Khulna and Dinajpur contributed to this report.]

Nasa's Perseverance

FROM PAGE 12
Not only can the process produce oxygen for future astronauts to breathe, but it could make hauling vast amounts of oxygen over from Earth to use as rocket propellant for the return journey unnecessary.

The Mars Oxygen In-Situ Resource Utilization Experiment -- or MOXIE -- is a golden box the size of a car battery, and is located inside the front right side of the rover.

Dubbed a "mechanical tree," it uses electricity and chemistry to split carbon dioxide molecules, which are made up of one carbon atom and two oxygen atoms.

It also produces carbon monoxide as a byproduct.

In its first run, MOXIE produced 5 grams of oxygen, equivalent to about 10 minutes of breathable oxygen for an astronaut carrying out normal activity.

MOXIE's engineers will now run more tests and try to step up its output. It is designed to be able to generate up to 10 grams of oxygen per hour.

Designed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MOXIE was built with heat-resistant materials like nickel alloy and designed to tolerate the searing temperatures of 1,470 degrees Fahrenheit (800 Celsius) required for it to run.

A thin gold coating ensures it doesn't radiate its heat and harm the rover.

MIT engineer Michael Hecht said a one tonne version of MOXIE could produce approximately 55,000 pounds (25 tonnes) of oxygen needed for a rocket to blast off from Mars.

Producing oxygen from Mars' 96 percent carbon dioxide atmosphere might be a more feasible option than extracting ice from under its surface then electrolyzing it to make oxygen.

Perseverance landed on the Red Planet on February 18 on a mission to search for signs for microbial life.

Its mini helicopter Ingenuity made history this week by achieving the first powered flight on another planet.

The rover itself has also directly recorded the sounds of Mars for the first time.

Czechs to cut Russian diplomat numbers amid spat

AFP, Prague

The Czech government said yesterday it would slap a ceiling on the Russian embassy workforce as part of a spiralling diplomatic row, which means dozens of staff will have to leave by next month.

Foreign Minister Jakub Kulhanek said Russia will have until the end of May to withdraw its embassy's employees to reduce their numbers to the same level as those of the Czech embassy in Moscow.

The Russian foreign ministry threatened retaliation.

Prague currently has a total of 24 embassy staff in Russia, which in turn has 94 staff in Prague.