

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.

Mosaddek Hossain, Dumuria upazila agriculture officer, told The Daily Star that all of Magurkhali union and many parts of Sharaipur 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. DoAare also providing seeds to those farmers at free of cost.

[Our Barishal correspondent also contributed for the story]

Food stock now only 4.62

FROM PAGE 1
The paddy procurement is likely to start on April 28 while that of rice on May 7, said the sources.

According to a food ministry report, obtained by The Daily Star, the government had 4.62 metric tonnes of food grains in its stock on April 20.

The stock was 11.20 lakh metric tonnes on July 1, 2020 when the current fiscal year began amid the pandemic. It was 15.99 lakh metric tonnes on July 1, 2019.

As the food stocks fell, the government distributed cash, instead of grains, under different public aid projects, including Food for Work.

The report said the government has distributed 5.37 lakh tonnes of food grains among people this fiscal year till March 31. It also said cash incentives, equivalent to 12.12 lakh metric tonnes of rice, were distributed under the social safety net programmes during the same time.

As the food stock went down, the price of coarse rice also increased in the last one year.

From March 20 last year to March 21 this year, the price of coarse rice increased by Tk 13.24 per kg in the retail market, the report stated.

Although the government tried to boost the stock by procuring rice from the international market, the initiative fell short of expectations due to different reasons.

Till April 11, the government has signed several deals to import 7.50 metric tonnes of rice under government-to-government arrangements. However, only 2.43 lakh metric tonnes of rice could be imported.

At the private level, 5.64 lakh metric tonnes of rice and 39.43 lakh metric tonnes of wheat have been imported this fiscal year till April 11, according to the report.

Food grain stock dipped to 4.78 lakh tonnes at the end of March this fiscal year, the lowest since August 2017-18 when the stock was 5.16 lakh tonnes, showed data from the Food Planning Monitoring Committee (FPMC).

The stock depleted also as a government move to procure rice and

paddy from the internal market was not successful in the last Boro and Aman seasons. It happened mainly as the prices fixed were lower than the production costs, shows the report.

So, this time, the FPMC has set the purchase price higher than the production costs so that the government move to increase the food stocks becomes a success, adds the report.

This time, the agriculture ministry has fixed the production cost of per kilogramme of paddy at Tk 27, which is Tk 1.27 more than last year's. The production cost of each kg of rice has been fixed at Tk 39, up Tk 1.02 from the price last year, said officials concerned.

According to the food stock report, last year the FPMC had decided to buy two lakh tonnes of paddy from growers at Tk 26 per kg and 6.5 lakh tonnes of rice from millers at Tk 37 per kg.

As the purchase prices were set lower than the production cost, farmers and millers chose to sell the grains at the market, instead of selling them to the government.

Last year, the government had set a target of collecting 16.70 lakh tonnes of Boro paddy, but it got only 9.10 lakh tonnes. Besides, against its target of purchasing 8.50 lakh tonnes of Aman paddy and rice, it could buy only 88,000 tonnes, shows the report.

When asked about the government's decision and the new prices fixed, Chitta Majumder, managing director of Majumder Group of Industries, one of the biggest rice millers and importers in the country, said the government would be successful if it set the purchase price of rice at Tk 40. "Otherwise, it would be hard for the government to achieve its target."

This year, the Boro production has been good.

"So, the government should fix the price at Tk 40 to ensure that farmers get their due prices.

"The government should have taken the move to import rice in June or July. If it had done so, the market would have been stable right now," he added.



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.

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

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 Banshkhali 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.

Another new

FROM PAGE 1
Health Initiatives and another by the scientists at Child Health Research Foundation.

"What information about this variant we have received so far from our collaborating colleagues in Europe is a bit concerning. However, it is too early to reach any conclusion," one of the Bangladeshi scientists linked to the study told The Daily Star yesterday.

The results of the genomic sequence were uploaded to the GISAID database between April 8 and 19.

The samples, which were detected, were collected between March 11 and April 13, according to the GISAID database.

Seven of the patients who were carrying this variant were from Dhaka city's different areas, while one was from Sunamganj, according to the GISAID database.

They were aged between 23 and 58. Earlier, the South African variant, known as B.1.351 or 501.V2, was also reported from Bangladesh and another UK variant, known as B.1.1.7, was detected in January.

The latest variant -- B.1.525 -- has since been found in 24 other countries, including Denmark, the US, and Australia.

It sports a handful of mutations, including one on the spike protein called E484K, according to the scientists.

This mutation is also found in variants that emerged in South Africa and Brazil and seems to help the virus evade antibodies, said researchers from the University of Edinburgh.

In addition, B.1.525 has similarities to the highly transmissible B.1.1.7 variant that also emerged in the UK, according to the researchers.

The World Health Organization, in its latest Epidemiological Update published on Tuesday, has enlisted this variant as a "variant of interest".

Scientists in Bangladesh have already revealed that the second wave of Covid-19 is mostly due to the South African variant.

Prof Sayedur Rahman, chairman of pharmacology at the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU), told The Daily Star yesterday, "Mutation of the virus is very normal. Although there are worrying issues, wearing mask properly can save us from any mutated virus."

COVID CLAIMS 98 MORE LIVES

Bangladesh recorded 98 coronavirus-related deaths in 24 hours till 8:00am yesterday as the second wave of the deadly virus overwhelms hospitals and pushes the health sector to its limits, reports UNB.

The virus also infected 4,014 others during the period, the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) said in a handout.

The number of coronavirus deaths now stand at 10,781 with a mortality rate of 1.46 percent, according to the DGHS.

The daily infection rate fell to 14.63 percent on Wednesday's 15.07 percent.

On Monday, the country had broken all the previous records of Covid-19 deaths registering 112 fatalities. It saw over 100 deaths on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.

Bangladesh reported its first coronavirus cases on March 8 last year and the first death on the 18th of that month.

Health authorities have so far confirmed 736,074 cases. Among them, 642,449 people -- 87.28 percent of all patients -- have recovered.

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 Towfiqul 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.]