



The upazila health complex in Saidpur town of Nilphamari.

PHOTO: STAR

## Saidpur upazila town yet to get govt hospital

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Nilphamari

Unlike all other government-run upazila health complexes in the country, the one in Saidpur upazila town serves only outpatients, as it never had the capacity to admit inpatients.

As a result, the Saidpur Upazila Health Complex -- housed in a British-era building in the heart of the busy commercial town -- only dispenses medicines and renders medical services that do not require hospitalisation.

If it was equipped to provide fully fledged inpatient services, it could be an immense relief for townspeople, especially when the Covid-19 pandemic is wreaking havoc across the country, said locals.

Without having the setup like a complete hospital, a good part of the funds allocated for the health complex oftentimes remains unutilised.

Although the government has successfully set up a modern hospital with 50 beds capacity in every upazila of the country, people of Saidpur have so far been deprived of one such facility in their upazila headquarters.

The townspeople have to travel to the outskirts of the town, in Kundol area, where a 100-bed hospital was established ages ago, primarily for the working class people of the town that hosts the largest railway workshop in the country. The hospital mainly treats various common diseases such as tuberculosis, diarrhoea, scabies, filaria and leprosy.

Locals said that though the hospital in Kundol is not capable of serving the entire population of Saidpur town, its existence near the town is causing the delay in setting up of a modern hospital in the town.

Abu Md Alimul Bashar, upazila health and family planning officer in Saidpur, said the Saidpur Upazila Health Complex now serves as a centre for vaccination under the EPI programme and a monitoring centre for different community clinics.

After serving the few outpatients who turn up the health complex, most of the hospital crew -- consisting of five doctors, seven nurses and several staffers -- usually find time to serve the Kundol hospital on deputation every day, he added.

Mazharul Anwar Shamim, Saidpur unit secretary of Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik (Shujon), said, "A hospital in an upazila is the lifeline of all medical services and its construction is a mandatory government programme. Otherwise, the general public will be deprived. It would also be able to serve additional patients during the time of pandemic."

Saying that the 100-bed hospital is well equipped to combat Covid-19 situation, Nilphamari Civil Surgeon Zahangir Kabir said a project proposal to set up a 50-bed health complex for Saidpur upazila has been submitted.

High officials recently visited the proposed site at Hazarihat village and its construction would start soon after the proposal is approved, he also said.

## Off-season watermelon brings smile to Patuakhali farmers

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Patuakhali

Many farmers in the district are raking in good profits by growing off-season varieties of watermelon usually a summer fruit, thanks to regionally developed hybrid variants and a farming technique called "mulching".

The Bari-1 and Bari-2 varieties of watermelon have been invented by the Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute (BARI)'s Regional Research Centre in Patuakhali. The specialty of this watermelon is that one of the varieties is yellowish like pineapple and the other is red like the common varieties found in summer.

Watermelon has a great demand because of its sweet juicy taste and flavour but up until now, it was only available in summer. But now this mellow fruit can be enjoyed all year round as these varieties of watermelon can be cultivated three times a year on the same land.

The growers are happy to get a hefty price and the buyers are also equally happy. In a bid to expand the cultivation, watermelon seedlings produced from the BARI are being distributed among the farmers free of cost.

In June this year, watermelon has

been cultivated on 20 acres of land in five upazilas of the district by following the "mulching" method. The production cost is relatively low. Other farmers in the surrounding villages are also showing interest in cultivating Bari-1 and Bari-2 varieties of watermelon.

The mulching method is to wipe out the weeds in the ground and elevate the ground a little and cover it with a special type of polythene so that the roots of the tree do not rot in the rain. Polythene is perforated at certain distances so that the watermelon plants can grow up through that perforation. The watermelon plants grow on a platform and bear fruit in 80 days.

Emran Hasan Sohel of Daspara village in Baulf upazila has cultivated watermelon on 30 decimals of the land. He was given 400 watermelon seedlings from BARI. He has spent a total of Tk 20,000 including labour, fertilizer, bamboo, and nets. He has already sold 200 pieces of watermelons for Tk 80,000. And he has about 200 watermelons left which he expects to sell for Tk 40,000.

Watermelon has also been cultivated in Kumirmara village of Kalapara upazila in the same method. Farmer Omar Faruq (35)

has cultivated watermelon on 66 decimals of land. He said that after working in Dubai as an expatriate worker, he returned to the country and started cultivating watermelon using the "mulching" method as per the instructions of BARI.

"I planted 1000 saplings provided by the BARI. A total of 1400 pieces of watermelons weighing 4 to 5 kg have already been harvested from the field. There are still 1300 pieces of watermelons remaining in the field. Buyers are buying watermelons from the field at Tk 100 to Tk 150 per kg," he said.

Rezaul Karim, scientific officer of BARI, said watermelon is usually available in the market from February to April. But farmers will be able to grow watermelons of the new varieties all year round. In June, they distributed 12,000 seedlings among the farmers.

He said watermelon seeds worth around Tk 300 crore had to be imported from abroad every year.

"But in 2020, two varieties of watermelon invented by our centre have been distributed to the farmer level. Farmers will be able to save the seeds. This will save a huge amount of foreign currency for seed import," he added.



The specialty of this watermelon is that one of the varieties is yellowish like pineapple.

PHOTO: SOHRAB HOSSAIN

## Chicken varieties

FROM PAGE 12

Scientists say the new varieties are suitable for rearing in large scale at farms, meaning they have great market potentials for farmers. They called for government support to increase its production.

The development comes as a welcome news for poultry farmers in Bangladesh, most of whom venture into this without any experience and training.

The marginal farmers in particular are dependent on dealers and local agents for chicks and other production inputs such as feed and medicines, with the intermediaries pocketing the lion's share of the profit.

In contrast, the BAU varieties are less prone to diseases. The meat is safer because it does not need additional vaccines and antibiotics, meaning farmers need little or no training and minimum input cost for their commercial production, said Prof Dr Bazlur Rahman Mollah, one of the lead researchers.

In just 42-45 days, each chicken weighs up to one kilogram, consuming only around 1.9kg of feed during the same time span, he added.

In respect of colour and taste, they resemble native chicken, with livability ranging from 97 to 98 percent at farm condition.

Additionally, they reduce carbon footprints since the parents could be reared in traditional way in which chickens are reared in open-sided houses relying on the free flow of air.

The production cost is also lower

than other crossbreed and indigenous chickens.

Led by Prof Dr Md Ashraf Ali and Prof Dr Bazlur Rahman Mollah of BAU's poultry science department, the research began in 2009 with funding from Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council (BARC).

The breakthrough came in 2014, after five years of numerous trial and error and strenuous lab and field research.

After the initial development of the two varieties, Krishi Gobeshona Foundation (KGF), a research institution, undertook a countrywide field study.

Findings indicate that the varieties are superior in terms of feed efficiency, growth, adaptability and disease resistance compared to other crossbreed chickens available in Bangladesh, said team leader Prof Dr Ashraf, also former dean of animal husbandry at BAU.

Much to the project's success, one variety, the Colour strain, has already hit the market -- per kg live chicken is sold at Tk 180 to Tk 220 at the BAU sales centres; one kg processed chicken at Tk 320 at Chaldal online shop, Tk 290-310 at Proteinhub while Tk 320 to Tk 340 at Meena Bazar.

Its commercial production kicked off in 2020 with financial and technical support from KGF.

Also with KGF funding, a new project was initiated early this year for conservation of parents of the developed strains and their expansion among poultry farmers across the country, said Dr Mollah, also chief

researcher at the Genome Sequence Research Team of Black Bengal Goat and Hilsa Fish.

Scientists aim to produce two lakh parents and three crore commercial chicks every year under the project.

"We are producing two types of day-old chicks -- one is commercial chicks and the other is parent chicks," Dr Mollah said.

Currently, sales price of each commercial chick is Tk 25 to 30 while each parent chick is Tk 125 to 130 at farmers' level. Currently, BAU poultry farm produces 30,000 chicks per month, he added.

BAU has the capacity to take the production to 10 lakh chicks a month if the government extended financial and infrastructure support, he said, adding, "We have sufficient technical staff for fabulous production."

An NGO called Proteinhub is also working on rearing the poultry varieties on commercial basis.

According to one estimate by researchers, Bangladesh now produces some 2.2 crore chicks per week. About 1.7 crore of them are broiler.

Bangladesh is self-sufficient in meat production, thanks to increased government and non-government support for poultry and cattle farming in rural areas over the last one decade.

Scientists said the market for the Colour variety has huge growth potential with demand rising. Mass production of BAU chickens will reduce Bangladesh's dependency on imports of parent chickens from other countries, they added.

## Wage strong

FROM PAGE 12

Ruhul Amin Gazi Mukti Parishad demanding the release of the journalist leader at Jatiya Press Club.

Police arrested Ruhul Amin Gazi, president of a faction of Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (BFUJ), under the DSA on October 21 last year.

Fakhrul suggested that journalists hold a convention in Dhaka demanding the release of Ruhul Amin Ghazi alongside intensifying the movement to have him freed.

He bemoaned that a group of journalists and the media owners have been desperately flattering the government to get its shelter and blessings. "This is the current situation of the country. It hurts me."

The BNP leader said the government has taken a stance against people, independence and the constitution to turn the country into a truly failed state. "The current government has become a subservient and puppet one. So, people have no freedom of speech and independence."

He also alleged that the government is snatching people's freedom of speech by procuring telephone-hacking tools from Israel.

"One thing we have to keep in mind is that there's no alternative to a mass upsurge uniting people to get rid of the current situation of the country. We don't have weapons and we also don't believe in armed struggle. We want to achieve the victory together with people," the BNP leader added.

Fakhrul accused the government of politicising all state and democratic institutions. "Awami League is a party that never believed in democracy. This is the party that established the one-party Baksal rule in 1975 by banning all the parties and shutting down all the newspapers."

He also said the government has failed to deliver on all fronts as it is focusing only on "corruption and plundering" public money.

Speaking at the programme, Nagorik Oikya convener Mahmudur Rahman Manna urged BNP leaders and activists to continue a movement against the current regime. "It may not take a long time to ensure the fall of this regime," he said.

## Raging Padma threatens

FROM PAGE 12

under water. The water entered the fields 10 days ago," said Jyosna Begum, a housewife of Char Ghoshpur village.

Her house also got inundated. Talking to The Daily Star, Jamal Uddin, sub-assistant agriculture officer of Pabna agricultural extension department, said over 800 hectares of crop fields were damaged in the shoal areas in the last one week. Of them, vegetable fields were the worst affected, he added.

"People in the shoal areas mostly cultivate vegetables and banana. Due to the floodwater, around 431 hectares of vegetables and 280 hectares of banana fields have so far been damaged," Jamal said.

As the water stays in huge areas for a long time, the cropland damaged by floodwater could finally be estimated after the water recedes, he added.

"I have cultivated four bighas of

vegetables, entire vegetable fields have gone

under water. The water entered the fields 10

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