

OMS of rice, flour starts in upazilas today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government will start open market sale of rice and flour at upazila level from today.

Agriculture Minister Muhammad Abdur Razzaque said this while talking to the media about the high price of rice after attending a session at the deputy commissioners' conference in the capital's Osmani Memorial Auditorium yesterday.

He said the food ministry currently has a food stock of 20 lakh tonnes, which is the highest ever. Meanwhile, newly produced rice will hit the market in April. As a result, rice prices will soon be stable and normal, the minister added. Over the last one month, retail prices of rice edged up as much as 6 percent

"Food prices have also sharply increased in the international market. Wheat prices, which were \$230-280 per tonnes, have risen to \$450."

in the capital. Yesterday, retail prices of medium-quality grain were Tk 52-58 a kg, up from Tk 48-Tk 56 a month ago, data from the state-run Trading Corporation of Bangladesh showed.

Explaining the reasons behind the price rise, Razzaque said, "Food prices have also sharply increased in the international market. Wheat prices, which were \$230-280 per tonnes, have risen to \$450."

"In the fiscal year 2020-21, 48 lakh tonnes of wheat were imported but only 16 lakh tonnes were imported until January in this fiscal year. Wheat imports are declining due to rising prices. As a result, the price of flour is higher than that of rice, but the flour price had always been lower than that of rice," he said.

At the same event, Food Minister Sadhan Chandra Majumdar said rice would be sold at Tk 30 a kg and flour at Tk 18 a kg through 1,776 dealers.



Dust and dirt are kicked up by the wheels of two human hauliers on AHM Kamruzzaman Sharani in front of the Sheikh Hasina National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery in the capital. The road has been in a dilapidated state for some time. The photo was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

Admin cadre too want UN mission berth

Proposal placed in DC conference; change to promotion policy also sought

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Like the members of armed forces and law enforcement agencies, admin cadre officials now want to participate in the UN missions as well.

A proposal was made in this regard on the second day of the annual deputy commissioners' (DC) conference yesterday.

Speaking to journalists after the meeting, KM Ali Azam, senior secretary of the public administration ministry, said, "Sending officials to UN Missions depends on the host country's demand."

"We have decided to send letters in this regard to the foreign ministry and Permanent Resident of the UN to avail the facilities."

The DCs also proposed updating promotion policies, setting up hospitals for government staffers in every divisional city and creating an additional deputy commissioner post in the districts where massive development works are going on.

Replying to a question, Azam said, "We've received proposals from three divisions for setting up hospitals. The Prime Minister has already given consent

in principle to set up hospitals at the divisional level."

The DCs were also given directives to remain alert to the surging Covid cases across the country.

The three-day long conference began on Tuesday at the Osmani Memorial Auditorium. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina inaugurated it virtually.

Yesterday, the DCs held six sessions with

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— Environment Minister

the ministers and officials of 12 ministries.

In one session, Environment Minister Shahab Uddin said the ministry gave directives to the DCs to take steps to stop hill cutting and deforestation.

"We've sought their cooperation to stop forest grabbing and shut down illegal brick kilns."

He added that they have already

written to the DCs to recover forests from grabbers.

Meanwhile, Textile and Jute Minister Golam Dastagir Gazi asked the DCs to conduct mobile court drives at least once a month to prevent use of illegal polythene.

He requested the DCs to check whether jute bags are used for the packaging of 19 products, including paddy, rice, wheat, maize, fertilizer, sugar, chili, ginger, garlic and onion.

Discussions were also held on setting up multipurpose cyclone centres and with rain harvesting systems in coastal areas.

Meanwhile, the disaster management and relief ministry rejected a proposal to release money at one go for rural infrastructure development.

"We told them that it is only possible to ensure the [desired] pace of work and monitoring if the money is released in two or three instalments in a year," said Enamur Rahman, state minister for disaster management and relief.

There was also a discussion on setting up grid substations in hilly areas and submarine cables to supply power in coastal areas.

Prioritise rapid test

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— and who are thus most likely to be actively transmitting the virus to others.

Coupled with their rapid results, the self-swab kits have become a vital tool in fast diagnosing infection with the Omicron variant — which causes mild symptoms among vaccinated people that is not too dissimilar from the common flu — and compelling people to isolate immediately.

Easy availability of such kits in Bangladesh, which is going through a third wave of Covid-19 cases, can help slow the spread of the virus, according to experts.

While the polymerase chain reaction remains the gold standard for detecting the virus, due to the inconvenience and costs involved in getting the test, many tend to avoid getting one and pose the risk of spreading the virus.

In public hospitals, the RT-PCR test costs Tk 100, while it costs Tk 3,000 in private healthcare providers. For at-home sample collection by private operators, it costs Tk 3,700, while it costs Tk 300 by public institutes.

The antigen test costs Tk 700 in private hospitals and Tk 100 in public healthcare points.

Only three types of people can be tested as per the guideline provided by the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR): people showing Covid-19 symptoms in the previous 1-7 days, those who came close to a metre of a Covid-19 patient and stayed

for at least 15 minutes, and healthcare staffers treating Covid-19 patients.

Data from the DGHS indicates that the antigen test has not been expanded so much: on average, 2,721 tests were conducted in a day in the past seven days.

"If the government really wants to curb the Omicron, the antigen testing kits must be made available everywhere at free of cost," Ridwanur Rahman, an infectious disease specialist, told The Daily Star yesterday.

While the official tally of Omicron cases in Bangladesh stands at 55, the ongoing surge in Covid-19 cases, particularly in Dhaka, is said to be driven by the heavily mutated variant.

In the 24 hours to 8 am yesterday, 9,500 cases were recorded — the highest since August 12 last year — and up from 8,407 cases the previous day.

Many countries in Europe and America and neighbouring India are offering lateral flow test kits, Rahman said.

Britain has used the tests to fight outbreaks since 2020, even before Omicron, and makes them freely available, while the US recently said that it planned to make 500 million tests available for free and that Americans could request that tests be sent to their homes.

"When the infection rate rises, choosing rapid antigen testing method is ideal — maybe 80 percent of the tests will come out to be positive and they can be isolated immediately," Tahmina Shirin, director of the IEDCR, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Asked why people's access to rapid kits at home is barred by the guideline, she said: "The guideline was adopted based on the situation at that time. But, it is the ministry higher-ups who can decide on updating it now."

After months of bureaucratic exercises, the health services division of the health ministry on September 17, 2020 had approved the antigen rapid testing at public healthcare centres.

Later on Jul 18 last year, the government initially approved 78 private healthcare organisations across the country to use rapid antigen test kits.

As of yesterday, the Directorate General of Drug Administration has given emergency use authorisation to 23 foreign brands inside the country as their kits met the criteria of 90 percent sensitivity and 95 percent specificity.

The retail price range per kit has been approved from Tk 220 to 550, according to the officials.

The local suppliers are allowed to supply kits to only the government's Central Medicine Store Depot and the approved private laboratories.

However, this newspaper has learnt that the rapid antigen kit of a brand is available for mass people in the market, which is illegal.

Contacted, ABM Khurshid Alam, the director-general of the DGHS, told The Daily Star: "If there are many other countries where the home-based rapid test is available, we will also consider it. But we have no plan right now."

JS may pass EC law this session

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20 people, including five women, for the posts of the CEC and other commissioners. It also said the names of the candidates and information on their assets should be published in a circular with their consent.

The draft also suggested holding a public hearing on those selected for the appointments, Majumdar said, adding the clauses should be incorporated in the proposed law to be placed in parliament.

Mentioning article 48 of the constitution, he said, "As the president can't make any decision without consultation with the prime minister, it is obvious that the president will have to discuss with the head of the government before finalising the names of CEC and other commissioners."

"If this is the case, then question will arise," he also said.

"Going by the draft, there is no way to know if the president is giving appointments from the candidates pitched by the search committee."

The cabinet approved the draft of "Chief Election Commissioner and Election Commissioner Appointment Act, 2022" for the EC formation on Monday, hours before the ruling Awami League joined the dialogue with the president on EC formation.

The government move came nearly 50 years after the constitution prescribed enacting a specific law for forming the EC.

The move comes also at a time when almost all political parties, during the recent dialogue with President Abdul Hamid, demanded the JS frame a law in this regard.

Civil society members too demand enactment of a law for EC formation.

The ATM Shamsul Huda led EC had prepared a draft law in 2012 and submitted it to the then Awami League government. But the law was never enacted.

The president initiated the dialogue with registered political parties seeking suggestions on forming an independent, neutral and credible EC on December 20.

A total 25 political parties participated in the talks, which ended on Monday with participation of the ruling AL. Seven political parties, including the BNP, however, refrained from taking part in it, saying a credible election is not possible under the current government.

WHAT THE DRAFT SAYS
According to the proposed law, a six-member search committee, to be headed by a judge of the Supreme Court's Appellate Division, will recommend names to the president for appointing the CEC and other commissioners.

The judge will be nominated by the chief justice.

The five other members will include a High Court judge, to be nominated by the CJ, the comptroller and auditor general, the chairman of Bangladesh Public Service Commission

and two distinguished citizens nominated by the president.

The search committee will make the recommendations in 10 working days following its formation, reads the draft law.

The president will then make the appointments upon the recommendations. Search committee will also be formed under the law in future.

According to the proposed law, the search committee cannot recommend anyone for the post of CEC who has been convicted and sentenced to at least two years' imprisonment for committing any criminal offence or moral turpitude or has been convicted under the International Crimes (Tribunal) Act, 1973 or holds any profitable posts of the republic.

The cabinet division will provide secretarial assistance to the search committee, according to the proposed bill.

The search committee will determine the agenda of its meeting whose quorum will be fulfilled in the presence of at least three members and the committee will take decision on votes.

If the number of votes is equal in any case, the presiding member of the search committee can cast a second vote to reach a result.

According to section 4 of the proposed law, the search committee will perform its responsibilities

Bangladesh open to observers in polls

FM tells outgoing US envoy

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen yesterday told outgoing US Ambassador Earl R Miller that Bangladesh would remain open to foreign election observers in the next parliamentary polls due next year.

During the envoy's farewell meeting with the minister at the state guesthouse Padma, they discussed ways of cooperation on human rights, said a foreign ministry statement.

Ambassador Miller said the US remains willing to stay closely engaged with Bangladesh on human rights related issues, including through holding regular dialogues.

Both sides expressed optimism that a series of dialogues and visits would take place in coming months and the bilateral relations would be enhanced further.

The US envoy is leaving Dhaka shortly after completing his tenure of more than three years here.

Earlier, Miller called on Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen and discussed issues of mutual interest.

Biggest 'ice' cache seized on the Naf

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

The BGB seized 50,000 yaba pills and 4.17kg of crystal meth worth Tk 22.37 crore from a boat on the Naf river early yesterday.

This is the biggest consignment of crystal meth, or "ice", seized in the country, Col Sheikh Khalid Mohammad Iftekhar, commander of BGB Battalion-2, told a press briefing.

He said they took position in Joillardwip area after getting information about the consignment. When BGB spotted the smugglers and opened fire, they jumped into the river and swam to Myanmar, abandoning the boat.

The team recovered the drugs from the boat after a search around 4:00am. No one was arrested till the filing of this report last night.

Dhaka's air again worst in the world

UNB, Dhaka

Dhaka's air quality index (AQI) was recorded at 269 at 10:11am yesterday, once again making the capital's air the world's most polluted.

China's Wuhhan and India's New Delhi occupied the next two positions, with AQI scores of 252 and 214 respectively.

An AQI between 201 and 300 is said to be "poor", while a reading of 301 to 400 is considered "hazardous" for residents.

A report by the Department of Environment and the World Bank in March 2019 pointed out that the three main sources of air pollution in Dhaka were brick kilns, fumes from vehicles and dust from construction sites.

the present Election Commission. But once the draft law is passed, none can raise any question against it," he said.

The search committee will recommend the names to the president for the appointments of CEC and other commissioners considering their qualifications, disqualifications, experiences, and honesty.

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Narayanganj, Cox's Bazar, Mymensingh, Khulna, Barishal, Rangpur, and Thakurgaon.

The DGHS has described the situation as "concerning".

The number of Covid-19 patients has increased by 228 percent this week till Tuesday, compared to the previous week, DGHS spokesperson Dr Nazmul Islam said in an online briefing yesterday.

During the same period, the number of deaths has also increased by 185 percent.

Nazmul said, "Latest statistics showed that the Delta variant has been spreading more [than the Omicron]. So we have no chance to be insincere."

He said that the number of patients has not increased in the hospitals, despite the rise in cases. "But there is no room for complacency."

According to the DGHS data, the overall bed occupancy in the Covid-19 hospitals countrywide has increased to 16 percent while it was 6 percent on January 1.

Meanwhile, the National Technical Advisory Committee (NTAC) on Covid-19 has recommended distributing masks free of cost to contain the coronavirus.