



Mounds of peanuts are seen ready for sale at a wholesale market alongside the Brahmaputra river in Chilmari upazila of Kurigram. The picture was taken recently.

PHOTO: S DILIP ROY

# PEANUTS A BLESSING for char farmers along Brahmaputra river

S DILIP ROY

The biggest peanut market in Rangpur is almost never found on the same spot two years in a row due to the changing waters of Brahmaputra river in Chilmari upazila of Kurigram.

The market is always established next to a boat base that also changes location each year based on the river's height and due to low water levels this year, both were set up in Faluar Char. Last year, the symbiotic businesses were set up in Jorgachh Char.

Local farmers told The Daily Star that they benefit greatly by setting up the market with the boat base each year, making it easier for wholesalers from different parts of the country to come buy their produce at fair prices.

Otherwise, growers face much hardship when carrying whole harvests from the river's sandy banks into the mainland.

**In fiscal 2019-20, peanuts were farmed on 81,000 acres in the region to produce 61,000 tonnes of crop, which is mainly used for its edible seed**

In fiscal 2019-20, peanuts were farmed on about 81,000 acres of land in the region to produce 61,000 tonnes of the legume crop, which is mainly used for its edible seed which can also be processed into edible oil.

However, peanut cultivation seems to be on the decline in the region as the crop was cultivated on 94,000 acres of land to produce 67,000 tonnes of the



crop in fiscal 2017-18, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics.

Zahurul Islam, a local peanut trader, told The Daily Star that the riverside market opens twice a week with about 150 to 200 tonnes of the crop being sold each day.

"We buy each maund (about 37 kilogrammes) of peanuts from farmers at Tk 3,200 to Tk 4,000," he said.

People who come to buy the peanuts in large quantities are able to ship the crop to their preferred destinations either by boat or truck, Islam added.

Fellow peanut trader Nabul Islam told this correspondent that in order to ensure the safety of buyers and sellers, police regularly patrol the area to prevent any untoward incident.

He went on to say that this year, farmers have sold him about 30 tonnes of peanuts so far.

The market season began in the first

week of January and will continue until the first week of March, he added.

Shafiqul Sarkar, a peanut seller based in Dhaka, said he comes to the market alongside Brahmaputra River every year.

So far, he has purchased about 100 tonnes of the crop from various local farmers and traders.

"I take shipments out of the char area on a horse-drawn carriage in order to deal with the area's sandy conditions," he said.

"After that, the nuts are loaded onto trucks that carry them into Dhaka," Sarkar added.

There are around 40,000 char farmers that grow peanuts along the Brahmaputra River, according to the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) in Kurigram.

Peanuts are planted in mid-October and harvested from the last week of December till the first week of January.

Char farmers get 12 to 15 maunds of the crop from each bigha of land at a cost of between Tk 8,000 to Tk 10,000.

Manjurul Haque, deputy director of the Kurigram DAE, said peanuts produced on the banks of Brahmaputra River are supplied to various parts of the country.

After harvesting the peanuts, the farmers plant various other crops such as maize, black cumin, chia seeds and sesame seeds, and wheat in the char land.

Char farmers are regularly advised and given technical support by DAE officials, Haque added.

Baktiar Hasan, a farmer of Faluar Char, told The Daily Star yields have been good this year and he expects good prices.

Hasan reaped 90 maunds of peanuts from seven bighas of land at a cost of about Tk 68,000 this year.

Peanut cultivation came as a blessing to the people living in char areas. By selling the produce, they are able to bring prosperity to their families.

"In addition, we do not have to suffer much to sell the crops as a market is set up in the char," he said.

A few years ago, farmers in the region had no idea about the seed, fertilisers and pesticides to use and so, yields were low, said Siddique Ali, a farmer in Char Karai Barisal.

Now though, yields are better than ever thanks to the use of modern techniques and materials.

"I produced 110 maunds of peanut from nine bighas of land at a cost of Tk 88,000," he said.

"I have sold peanuts worth Tk 3.85 lakh so far at Tk 3,500 per maund," Ali added.

## Gas price hike should be gradual

Says BUILD chair

MD ASADUZ ZAMAN

The government should move gradually and reconsider energy companies' recent proposal to raise gas prices as any sharp hike will increase overall cost of production of industries, said Abul Kasem Khan, chairperson of Business Initiative Leading Development (BUILD).

"If gas prices are hiked at a steep rate, it will not be possible for the overall industry to absorb it," he said in a phone interview with The Daily Star.



He said prices were going up globally and it was natural that the pressure would be felt here as Bangladesh imports natural gas. But prices may be increased gradually, he said.

Several gas distribution companies had recently proposed that Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission

increase prices by as much as 117 per cent following a government directive to reduce dependence on subsidies.

The economy has entered into a recovery phase and any price increase will affect its revival, said Khan, a former president of the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce & Industry, adding that a price hike was not a long-term solution.

"We should focus on alternative sources. The country's growing dependence on imports in the energy sector is not safe for the future," he said.

"If we want to reduce the dependency on foreign markets, we have to focus on exploring domestic resources to ensure long-term energy security and sustain industrialisation," he added.

"The government should focus on exploration activities on a large scale," said Khan.

If the Bangladesh Petroleum Exploration and Production Company is not capable of conducting exploration for gas and mineral resources alone, it should consider involving the private sector, he said.

Khan also suggested using alternative sources of energy.

## Sri Lanka inflation hits record 14pc

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka consumer prices shot up a record 14 per cent in December, surpassing a previous high of 11.1 from a month earlier, official figures showed on Saturday as food and fuel shortages worsen.

Senior ministers warned parliament earlier in the week of a growing food crisis with rice harvests due in March expected to be drastically lower after an agrochemical import ban last year saw farmers abandoning more than 30 per cent of agricultural land.

The island's tourism-dependent economy has been hammered by the pandemic with the government imposing broad import restrictions to avert a foreign exchange crisis, triggering a shortage of essential goods.

The Census and Statistics Department said year-on-year inflation in December was the highest since the National Consumer Price Index (NCPI) was established in 2015.

It said food inflation also hit a record 21.5 per cent, up from 16.9 per cent in November and 7.5 per cent a year ago. The use of substandard organic fertiliser and pesticides has sharply reduced vegetable and fruit crop yields.

## More foreign firms leaving Myanmar

AFP, Paris

The announcements Friday by TotalEnergies and Chevron have swelled the ranks of foreign firms that have quit Myanmar after the February military coup.

As the civilian death toll from the military crackdown has surpassed 1,500 people, activists have ratcheted up pressure on foreign firms.

Investors piled into the country after the military relaxed its iron grip in 2011, paving the way for democratic reforms and economic liberalisation in the country of more than 50 million people.

They poured money into telecommunications, infrastructure, manufacturing and construction projects.

Now they face either pulling up sticks like TotalEnergies and Chevron, suspending operations, or continuing with business as usual.

The decisions by TotalEnergies and Chevron to leave were significant, as the more than \$1 billion in fees and taxes they paid to operate the Yadana gas field in the Andaman were Myanmar's single largest source of foreign currency revenue, according to Human Rights Watch. Last year, Norway's Telenor announced it would sell off its Myanmar subsidiary, which was one of the nation's largest mobile phone networks, although the deal has yet to be finalised. This week, it sold its stake in a Burmese digital payments service.

British American Tobacco, which employed more than 100,000 people in Myanmar before the coup, pulled up sticks in October. French renewable energy firm Voltalia has also left. Japanese carmaker Toyota, which was due to launch manufacturing at a Myanmar factory last year, put the project on hold.

Myanmar factories became suppliers of many popular clothing brands over the past decade, but groups such as Italy's Benetton stopped placing new orders after the coup.



A signboard for TotalEnergies EP Myanmar is seen past a shuttered gate in Yangon yesterday, after energy giants TotalEnergies and Chevron said they would leave Myanmar following pressure from human rights groups to cut financial ties with the junta.

PHOTO: AFP

## UK retail sales suffer record drop on Omicron fears

AFP, London

British retail sales suffered a record drop in December as consumers shunned the high street due to Omicron concerns, having snapped up Christmas purchases the previous month, data showed Friday.

Total sales volumes dropped 3.7 per cent last month from November, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) said in a statement. That was the biggest December month-on-month drop since the data series began in 1996, the ONS said.

Sales had risen by one per cent in November as some consumers bought early gifts for the festive season amid fears over supply-chain problems.

"After strong pre-Christmas trading in November, retail sales fell across the board in December with feedback from retailers suggesting Omicron impacted on footfall," noted Heather Bovill, ONS deputy director.