

Visitors flock to get a sight of Padma Bridge

SAJJAD HOSSAIN, Munshiganj

After much anticipation, people from regions across the country flocked to see the Padma Bridge on the weekend.

From noon yesterday, visitors kept arriving at various points along the riverbank in Munshiganj's Louhajang in private cars and public transport.

Their interests piqued upon hearing about the bridge's inauguration on June 25. This correspondent saw a festive scene at the site, with visitors standing on trawlers and speedboats, taking pictures to preserve their first sighting of the bridge.

However, due to security reasons, tourist trawlers were moving about a kilometre away from the bridge's pillars.

Visitors had travelled long distances to see the bridge with their family members and friends. Even the popular writer Anisul Hoque visited with a trawler at 3:00pm yesterday.

Hasan Niloy, a private employee, came to Shimuliaghat from Dhaka's Mohammadpur area. He and his six friends went there on their motorbikes. They rented a trawler for Tk 2,000 to see the bridge.

"It is a great pleasure to see one of the largest structures in the country," he said.

Jiban Hossain, a fruit trader from Chashara area of Narayanganj, said, "For many years, we had to suffer while crossing Padma by ferry during Eid. Once the bridge is inaugurated, travel time will be saved and the perilous journeys will end."

Mohiuddin Ahmed, a resident of Dhaka's Mirpur-1, saw the entire bridge, from its Mawa end to the Jajira end. "I saw the pillars and spans over Padma. The joy I feel is beyond words," he said.



SUMMER'S GOODBYE... As the country has started to see frequent rainfall, Krishnachura can be noticed far less often on trees -- signalling the transition of the season. This photo was taken recently from Chattogram city's Kazir Dewri area.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

NATIONAL TEA DAY

'Can't even get a good night's sleep'

Tea workers in Mominchhara continue to suffer for authorities' inaction

MINTU DESHWARA, back from Sylhet

Monal Mia, a 65-year-old tea worker in Mominchhara tea garden of Sylhet's Fenchuganj, works in the gardens all day, only to come back home at night to get soaked in rainwater, due to the dilapidated condition of the roof over his head.

"The roof tins have multiple holes. I can't even get a good night's sleep after a long hard day at work."

It's not just him. Almost all the workers in that vicinity, afflicted with poverty, are going through similar difficulties.

"On rainy nights, we have to sleep under the bed. I've asked the authorities to fix our roof multiple times but to no avail," said tea worker Sreemoti Mridha and her husband Montu Mridha.

Another worker, Diboshmoni Mridha, said they have to stay alert all night, as their house is at risk of collapsing anytime.

Then there is the issue of sanitation. Most houses where the tea workers live lack suitable sanitation system.

"We don't have a toilet in our house. We have to go all the way to the garden toilet," said Diboshmoni.

This correspondent also talked to tea worker Sita Mridha, a mud wall of whose house collapsed on a rainy night a few days ago. "I've been using my sharee to cover that front of the tiny house. After waiting for a few days -- when I gave up the hope of getting any assistance from the authorities -- I started fixing it on my own," said Sita.



Due to its dilapidated condition, a mud wall of tea worker Sita Mridha's house collapsed on a rainy night. She had covered that front with a sharee while waiting for the garden authorities' assistance for a few days. However, she has given up on that hope and started repairing the wall on her own.

PHOTO: STAR

Meanwhile, tea workers of the vicinity have been making various demands to the authorities for some time, only to have their voices ignored.

According to Liton Mridha, president of Mominchhara Tea Garden Panchayat Committee of Bangladesh Tea Workers Union, they made 13 demands to the tea garden authorities.

"Of them, we focused more on the main three, including limiting the

daily collection of tea leaves to 20 kg, hiring drivers from the tea workers community and employing the workers' children who have educational qualifications."

"None of the demands have been considered by the authorities. Female tea workers of the garden have reduced their working hours by half to protest the negligence," said Liton.

Liton mentioned that the current owner set the daily limit of plucking at 25 kg for a year before promotion. However, the limit has not been reduced since then.

The situation took an even worse turn when the garden authorities, without any prior notice, closed the garden on the evening of May 25, pushing around 800 workers and their families into uncertainty.

When asked, Sylhet Deputy Director of Regional Labour Department

Khorshed Alam said tea workers did not make the demands in a formal way, and their strike did not follow the policies at place.

However, Liton mentioned that after reopening the garden last Thursday, the authorities promised to negotiate with the workers regarding their demands.

"We are left panicking whenever it rains, fearing that our houses might collapse, owing to their dilapidated conditions," said Liton.

Contacted, Mominchhara Tea Garden Manager Rezwana Alam told this correspondent, "We have opened the tea garden on Thursday with everyone's support. Every effort will be made to meet all demands made by workers in phases."



It's officially litchi season! Two-day litchi festival held in Ishwardi

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Pabna

One of the attractions that summer brings is the variety of seasonal fruits. Fans of summer fruits rarely avoid litchi, a fruit that is available for a very short period.

Pabna's Ishwardi upazila is at the forefront when it comes to litchi production, as the fruit is distributed and marketed all across the country during summer from there.

Following the success of this year's production, farmers of Ishwardi organised a two-day litchi festival, displaying different varieties of the fruit on Thursday and yesterday. The festival was organised by Bangladesh Krishak Unnayan Society at Bangladesh Sugar Crop Research Institute.

Agriculture Minister Abdur Razzaque inaugurated the festival on Thursday afternoon.

Earlier, the minister visited different litchi orchards in Ishwardi.

"Farmers of Ishwardi have proven their success in cultivating litchi, guava, plum and other seasonal fruits in the last few years. However, they are mostly dependent on local markets. If companies invest in production and develop the technology, we can even send the fruits to the international market," said the minister.

Siddikur Rahman Moyez, president of Bangladesh Krishak Unnayan Society, said, "Litchi production has widely spread across the country due to the availability of suitable land

SEE PAGE 4 COL 6



PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

For almost 20 years now, Sultan has been selling these hand-crafted fans, made of palm leaves, in different areas of Khulna's Dumuria upazila. Selling almost 100 pieces on an average day, with each going for Tk 20, his fans offer much-needed respite to his customers amidst the summer heat. This photo was taken recently.

The misunderstood cat

Fishing cats in danger, as loss of habitat leading to conflicts with humans

FARAZ ISLAM

You might think cats hate water, right? While that may be true for felines in general, there's one big exception. A species commonly known as the fishing cat, *Prionailurus viverrinus*, approximately twice the size of a house cat, is an expert swimmer and loves to hunt in the water.

However, this captivating cat is in danger. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) Red List, the fishing cat population has globally declined by over 30 percent in the last 15 years.

The species is listed as "vulnerable" on the IUCN Red List, due to the numerous challenges it faces, such as degradation of its wetland habitats, conflict with humans, and inadequate conservation funding.

The fishing cat has an olive-grey

coat decorated with black spots and stripes. It primarily feasts on fish, which it catches with its dextrous, retractable claws. It is strongly associated with wetland habitats, where its preys are abundant.



Globally, this species can be spotted in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and India's West Bengal. In Bangladesh, it is found across the country in discontinuous

populations.

Muntasir Akash, a lecturer at Dhaka University's zoology department, said, "According to our information, at least 160 cats have been killed in the country in the last 15 years."

More deaths are reported in Moulvibazar, Habiganj, Natore, Magura and Faridpur. "We are researching why they are dying at such an alarming rate," he said.

Rapid destruction of wetlands, which are purposefully being filled and polluted, is a major threat to their lives. Due to the destruction, the cats are now in conflict with humans, as they are compelled to hunt farm animals, he added.

The fight to save the species reached a major milestone in 2012, with the initiation of "Project Fishing Cat". Founded by Sayam Chowdhury, the organisation works in one of the fishing-cat hotspots in Haal haor, in

SEE PAGE 4 COL 3