



Hired labourers unload catkins from a boat and then load the item onto a truck at Ghatrapar in Lalmonirhat Sadar upazila. The photos were taken recently.

PHOTO: STAR

Catkin growers all smiles

Several thousand farmers in Lalmonirhat, Kurigram are engaged in the seasonal business worth Tk 500 crore

SDILIP ROY

Bumper yield of catkin, locally called kashia, this season has brought smiles to many farmers in Kurigram's Chilmari upazila as they are earning a handsome profit by selling the produce at good prices due to its high demand.

Usually, farmers do not cultivate or invest any money for producing the item as it is grown on char lands naturally.

Farmers said there are at least 10 wholesale catkin markets in the two districts, including seven in Kurigram and three in Lalmonirhat and catkin worth Tk 500 crore are traded in those markets every season.

Of them, Kurigram's Chilmari catkin market is considered as the largest one, where a good number local traders are involved with the catkin business.

The catkin markets are located in Kulaghat, Ghatrapar and Khatamari areas along the Dharla river in Lalmonirhat Sadar upazila, and Jatrapur, Mogholbasa, Jorgachh, Hatia, Bridgepar, Begumganj and Ramna areas beside the Brahmaputra river in Kurigram.

Many wholesale and retail traders from different areas across the country come to these catkin markets for buying catkin from the local traders and sometimes directly from the growers.

Trader Mizanur Rahman at Jorgachh



Catkin Haat in Kurigram's Chilmari upazila said this year they are buying each bundle of catkin at Tk 18 to Tk 20 from the char farmers, and selling those at Tk 20 to Tk 22 to the buyers from different areas of the country.

They bought each bundle of catkin at Tk 13 to Tk 14 last year, Mizanur said.

Another trader Nazir Hossain at the same market said they buy catkin from farmers living in the Brahmaputra river basin areas and sell those to buyers from different areas of the country.

"Buying and selling of catkin is a

seasonal trade and farmers earn a handsome profit from this business. Many betel leaf growers from Barishal, Rajshahi, Kushtia, Barguna, Jhalakathi, Meherpur and different other areas across the country pay us in advance for the catkin," Nazir added.

Mazidul Islam, a catkin trader at Ghatrapar Catkin Market in Lalmonirhat Sadar upazila, said he has been selling eight to ten trucks of catkin to the buyers from different areas every day.

Each truck can carry about 12,000 to 13,000 bundles of catkin, he said, adding

that they purchase each bundle of catkin at Tk 18 to Tk 20 and sell it to the buyers at Tk 20 to Tk 22.

One of the buyers Saheb Ali Mandal from Rajshahi said like him many other buyers from different parts across the country come to the char villages along the Brahmaputra and Dharla rivers every year to buy catkin.

They purchase catkin from the local traders and carry the item by boats or trucks to different areas of the country, he said, adding that betel leaf growers across the country are its main buyers.

This year they are buying catkin at a high price as it has a good demand among the betel leaf growers, he said, adding the item has a market worth Tk 500 crore in the two districts.

According to Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) in Lalmonirhat and Kurigram, catkin is grown naturally on around 10,000 hectares of land at nearly 300 villages along the Brahmaputra and Dharla river basin areas under the two districts.

Around 15,000 farmers living in those char villages are getting benefit from selling catkins every year.

Kurigram DAE Deputy Director Biplab Kumar Mohanta said catkin is grown on sandy char lands in between June to October and harvested from the middle of December to end of January.

Traffic jam: A never ending menace

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Mymensingh

Traffic jam has turned daily trips into nightmares for commuters in Phulpur upazila, but no step has been taken to stop menace continuing for years.

The serious traffic congestions prevail in different roads of the upazila town has been a regular scenario for over a decade now and it is going beyond control day by day, locals alleged.

Locals said hundreds of Dhaka-bound vehicles from Sherpur and Mymensingh's Haluaghat upazila cross the upazila town round the clock every day.

Though town people have been reeling from huge problem due to the menace for several years, no fruitful steps have been taken yet to resolve the matter, locals said.

Sources said over 3,000 three-wheelers, including battery-run auto-rickshaws, rickshaws and rickshaw-vans, all unlicensed, run in the municipality roads, which is several times higher than that of the road capacity.

Besides, many CNG-run auto-rickshaws occupy the main intersection of the town during the busy hours, disrupting movements of Dhaka and Mymensingh bound buses and trucks.

While talking to this correspondent, Phulpur Municipality Mayor Shashadhar Sen said due to movement of auto-rickshaws from different other areas traffic jam has been an increasing problem for the town dwellers.

Established in 2001, Phulpur Municipality has a population of over 40,000.

There are no registered three-wheelers under the municipality authority as everyone seem reluctant about registering their vehicles, the mayor said, adding that they asked the three-wheeler owners to get their vehicles registered on several occasions, but failed to do so due to unknown reason.

Although they conduct drives against the unregistered vehicles quite often, the menace could not be stopped even for a single day, the mayor added.

Meanwhile, blaming the municipal authorities for their inaction, local people alleged that occupation of footpaths by the vendors is also a major reason behind the never-ending traffic jam.

Admitting the fact, Officer in Charge of Phulpur Police Station Mahbubur Rahman said only four traffic police are assigned to control movements of thousands of vehicles every day and it is very insufficient.

Contacted, Advocate Shabbir Ahmed Liton, secretary of Paribesh Rokhya O Unnayan Andolon, said the municipality authorities should take people's woes into consideration and show zero tolerance against all modes of unregistered vehicles plying in the municipality roads.



PHOTO: STAR

2 Star reporters cornered

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On seeing this, the other youths fled the scene.

It is at this point that the situation escalated for the correspondents.

The youths were hurling abuses at the correspondents and blamed them for their plan coming undone.

"Why don't you come out? Get out soon - we are waiting. We will show you who we are."

The correspondents informed the presiding officer and sought his help to leave the centre safely. The presiding officer said he could not do much as he had just one police officer at the centre.

Finally, around 2:40pm, the correspondents attempted to leave the centre with the help of another reporter. However, they were caught by some 20-25 youths at the centre's gate.

The mob started hurling abuses and then surrounded the reporters. They grabbed the reporters' phones and deleted the footage and photos taken of the youths' misadventure at the voting centres.

After deleting the video, they demanded the release of the youth caught attempting to cast fake votes. They claimed that he was held solely because of the two reporters.

At one point, they started shoving the reporters and yelling at them. "We will not release you unless you free our man."

Though the whole incident occurred in front of the law enforcers, they did not take any action.

As the situation worsened, the reporters returned to the centre and sought the presiding officer's help again.

The correspondents waited at the office of the presiding officer, who then sought police reinforcements.

While the correspondents waited, two different youths came up and, in the presence of the presiding officer, said: "If you can release our man, we will help you to leave the centre."

At 3:05pm, the correspondents finally managed to leave the polling centre under additional police protection.

AL pick loses candidacy

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AL, attacked him.

This correspondent could not contact Mujibur for comments.

On Friday, a telephone conversation between the Banskhalhi OC and the lawmaker got leaked where Mostafizur threatened the OC with cutting off hands of police personnel if the cops dared to detain or do anything to his supporters. The audio clip also went viral on social media.

On November 30 last year, Mostafizur and his followers assaulted Rokib Uddin, a reporter of Independent TV, and abused him verbally when the reporter questioned about the violation of the electoral code of conduct during the submission of his nomination paper to the returning officer.

Anupam Shil, a senior reporter of the channel, lodged a complaint with the RO against Mostafizur.

Following the allegation, the election enquiry committee investigated the incident and found the allegation to be true.

On December 26, Muhammad Harun Molla, upazila election officer of Banskhalhi, filed a case accusing Mustafizur and 20 to 30 others with a Chattogram court as the enquiry committee asked him to do it for attacking the reporter and breaching the polls code.

Mustafizur secured bail in the case on January 3.

On several occasions, Mostafizur grabbed the headlines for his misconduct with admin officials, police, journalists, and party leaders.

'Predictable' polls 'guarantees'

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election today: With no opposition, Sheikh Hasina set to win again."

Ahead of the election day, Qatar-based Al Jazeera in an article - "Vote doesn't count: Bangladesh's 'bizarre' election tests ties with West - said for the ruling AL what remains a challenge is voter turnout.

"In fact, this is our only concern now," Bahauddin Nasim, joint secretary general of the party, told the news outlet.

In the article, Dhaka-based political analyst Zahed Ur Rahman said the AL's main aim in this election is to show the world that even without the main political opposition in Bangladesh's essentially "two party politics," the turnout could be high.

"This would help them to establish the narrative that Bangladesh's democracy has evolved into a multi-party democracy where the BNP is no longer relevant while Awami League very much is," Rahman said.

"But I am not sure who is buying that," Rahman added.

Rahman said he worries more about the aftermath of the polls than the outcome, fearing some sort of Western response is on the cards.

However, Sreeradha Datta, professor at the Jindal School of International Affairs in Sonapat, India, told Al Jazeera that she doesn't expect any "dramatic reactions" from the US or other Western countries to an AL victory.

India, Bangladesh's neighbour and South Asia's biggest power, will almost certainly go to "congratulate Hasina and the Awami League" and their bilateral relationship will be back to "business as usual," Datta said.

"The USA will point out the anomalies in the process but when all other important neighbours like China, India and Russia accept the election verdict there is very little that the USA can do apart from sanctions which they have already threatened," she said.

Polls largely 'free and fair'

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turnout of voters in a provincial election in Canada two years ago and said there was no complaint in this regard.

Bangladesh has the shortest voting hour in the world, said Jim Bates, co-founder and executive director of the United States-Bangladesh Friendship Group.

"Therefore, the question of voter turnout is out of context. Most countries in the world vote for more hours. In some US states, voting takes place for a month."

He said, "The voting here was free, fair and peaceful," adding, that journalists in his country are not as investigative and honest as those of the Bangladeshi media.

"The media here reports the reality." The electoral process is very impressive, said Paulo Casaca, executive director of the South Asian Democratic Forum.

"The women and lesser educated people voted in good numbers, which was great to see."

Participation by the opposition party in the polls would have made the elections more festive, he said, adding, he was saddened by the violence that claimed several lives in the electoral violence.

Paulo said it was also upsetting that there was no consensus among

the political parties as that would have ensured full participation.

Alexander Gray of the American Global Strategies said he observed a free, fair and efficiently-handled election. "The voters too voted with excitement."

Andrei Shutov, member of Russia's Central Election Commission, said he was impressed by the transparent and open voting process and the efficient handling of voting by the Election Commission officials. The security too, he added, was well ensured.

He said Bangladesh has a long tradition of democracy and elections, which is further developing.

In response to a question, Shutov said the world is transitioning from unipolarity towards multipolarity.

"However, some countries that don't like it are fighting for their hegemony. Independent countries like Bangladesh should do everything for their national objectives, instead of being influenced by others."

OIC Head of Election Unit Shkir Mohammad Bandar said they found the election being held peacefully with a good number of young voters at the polling centers.

"Also, security situation was satisfactory without interference of any political party."

'Can't say we did very well'

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Meanwhile, CEC Habibul said voters were free to vote, but that ballot stuffing attempts were made at several polling places and that those ballots would be removed from the count.

About the way the election was conducted, Habibul stated, "We are not saying we have done very well. But we've tried our best. And we've taken action against polls irregularities."

According to EC, there were reports of irregularities from 140 centres. Polling was suspended in 21 centres in at least nine constituencies. Forty-two people were arrested in connection with the irregularities.

Besides, the candidature of AL nominee Mostafizur Rahman in Chattogram-16 was cancelled for threatening law enforcement officials.

In response to a question about

whether the election will have international credibility, Habibul said the EC would be able to make a statement once it knew what the public and media were saying.

Referring to the various steps taken by the EC to make the elections fair, the CEC said that the government has sincerely supported the commission. "With the concerted efforts of all, the election has been free, fair, and impartial under the current government."

He said ballots were sent to about 90 percent of polling centres in the morning. In remote centres, ballots were dispatched the night before.

While thanking all who had performed duties during the polls, Habibul expressed shock at the death of two election officials due to heart failure while they were discharging polls duty.

Fire renders nearly 7,000 Rohingyas

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to assist the devastating fire that ravaged Camp 5, one of the 33 camps in Cox's Bazar, where about a million Rohingyas live.

The Rohingyas displaced by the fire are temporarily taking shelter within the camp's community centres, including in temporary communal shelters, and are provided with emergency food assistance.

Bangladeshi authorities and humanitarian agencies are on site to assist the people affected by the fire with emergency support, medical and psychological first aid, and linking refugees with other relevant services as required.

In the aftermath of the fire, the government and the UNHCR, in coordination with IOM and other aid agencies, are supporting the Rohingyas who lost their shelters and belongings in the devastating blaze during cold weather and assessing further needs.

"The cause of the fire currently remains unknown, and we are assured by the government authorities that an investigation into the cause of the fire will be carried out," the UN Refugee Agency said.

Fires often break out in the crowded camps with their makeshift structures. A massive blaze in March 2021 killed at least 15 refugees and destroyed more than 10,000 homes.

Last year, about 12,000 people were left homeless after nearly 2,800 shelters and more than 90 facilities, including hospitals and learning centres, were destroyed in a fire.

More than 1 million Rohingya refugees have fled to Bangladesh from Myanmar over several decades, including about 740,000 who crossed the border starting in late August 2017, when the Myanmar military launched a brutal crackdown.

Conditions in Myanmar have worsened since a military takeover in 2021 and attempts to send back the refugees have failed. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has said on several occasions that the refugees would not be sent back forcefully. Rights groups say conditions in Myanmar are not conducive to repatriation.