

India slaps indefinite ban on onion exports

No immediate impact on Dhaka kitchen markets

STAR REPORT

India has extended its ban on onion exports indefinitely – a surprise move that comes ahead of a general election.

Imposed in December, the ban was due to expire on March 31. Traders had anticipated it would be lifted as local prices have more than halved since the export restrictions were implemented and this season's crop is yielding fresh supplies.

However, the government issued an order late on Friday that the ban will remain in place until further notice, reports Reuters.

"The extension is surprising and completely unnecessary, considering the falling prices with rising supplies from the new season crop," said an executive at a Mumbai-based export firm, who declined to be identified.

Onion prices in some wholesale markets in Maharashtra, the biggest onion-producing state, have fallen to Rs 1,200 rupees (\$14) per 100 kg from Rs 4,500 in December, the executive said.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is seeking a record-equalling third straight term in upcoming elections that will be held over almost seven weeks from April 19.

Bangladesh, Malaysia, Nepal and the United Arab Emirates rely on imports from India, the world's biggest exporter of onion, to fill domestic gaps in onion supply.

Meanwhile, the prices of the essential cooking ingredient did not increase at the wholesale and retail markets in Dhaka yesterday following the extension of the ban by India, reports our staff correspondent.

Traders said most of the businesspeople were unaware of India's decision. In the afternoon, sale of onion increased slightly in the wholesale markets.

Retailers and wholesalers at Ibrahimpur, Kachukhet and Karwan
SEE PAGE 6 COL 5



In this aerial view, Palestinians assess the destruction of a house hit by Israeli bombardment in the northern part of Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Blocked aid for Gaza a moral outrage

Says UN chief; Israel kills 9 Palestinians waiting for aid, says health ministry

AGENCIES

A long line of blocked relief trucks on Egypt's side of the border with the Gaza Strip where people face starvation is a moral outrage, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said during a visit to the Rafah crossing yesterday.

It was time for Israel to give an "ironclad commitment" for unfettered access to humanitarian goods throughout Gaza, said Guterres, who also called for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire and the release of Israeli hostages held in Gaza.

The UN would continue to work with Egypt to "streamline" the flow of aid into Gaza, he said in comments made in front of the gate of the Rafah crossing, an entry point for aid, reports Reuters.

"Here from this crossing, we see the heartbreak and heartlessness of it all.

A long line of blocked relief trucks on one side of the gates, the long shadow of starvation on the other," he said. "That is more than tragic. It is a moral outrage."

Meanwhile, the health ministry in Hamas-run Gaza said Israeli fire yesterday killed nine people and wounded dozens more as they were waiting at an aid distribution point in the territory's north, according to AFP.

The visit by Guterres comes as Israel faces global pressure to allow more humanitarian aid into Gaza, which has been devastated by more than five months of war between Israel and Hamas.

Israel, which has vowed to destroy Hamas and is worried that the Palestinian group will divert aid, has kept all but one of its land crossings into the enclave

SEE PAGE 6 COL 1

LIQUOR POLICY SCAM CASE

Delhi HC rejects Kejriwal's urgent plea for hearing

NDTV ONLINE

The Delhi High Court has turned down Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's request for an urgent hearing on his petition in which he has challenged his arrest as well as a lower court's order granting the Enforcement Directorate his custody for seven days.

The Aam Aadmi Party chief was arrested on Thursday in the liquor policy case and, the next day, a court in Delhi had remanded him in the ED's custody till March 28. The petition against his arrest had been filed by Mr Kejriwal yesterday and he had also sought an urgent hearing of the case by today.

The Delhi High Court today, however,



SEE PAGE 6 COL 6

EID-UL-FITR

Sale of advance train tickets starts today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh Railway will start selling advance tickets today for intercity trains ahead of Eid-ul-Fitr holidays.

As per the previous announcement, tickets for April 3 will be sold today (March 24) while tickets for April 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 will be sold on March 25, 26, 27, 28, 29 and 30 respectively.

All tickets will be available online. The sale of tickets for trains bound for the western zone will start at 8:00am while the sale of tickets for east-bound trains will begin at 2:00pm.

The sale of return train tickets for April 13 will start from April 3.

Last year, BR started selling all advance train tickets online to reduce people's suffering in physically buying tickets from counters at stations.

Indian cop arrested for intrusion

UNB, Jhenaidah

Members of Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) arrested an Indian policeman along with US and Indian currencies as he illegally intruded into Bangladesh territory through the Maheshpur border in Jhenaidah on Friday.

The arrestee was identified as PV John Silveraraj, a member of the police in the Tamil Nadu State of India, according to his professional ID card that was found on him.

HM Salah Uddin Chowdhury, commander of the BGB 58 battalion, said the Indian policeman was arrested as he was entering Bangladesh through the Maheshpur border on Friday afternoon.

During the preliminary interrogation, the arrestee informed that he had entered Bangladesh in order to go to Thailand from here, he said.

Farmer killed in elephant attack

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Mymensingh

A 41-year-old farmer was killed in an attack by elephants in Dhobaura upazila of Mymensingh early yesterday.

The victim was identified as Ainal Haque of the upazila's Jhigatola village.

Quoting locals, Mohammad Chand Miah, officer in charge of Dhobaura Police Station said Ainal was watering his boro field in the bordering area. Suddenly, a herd of elephants entered the area, attacked Ainal and trampled him to death around 12:30am, said the OC.

Window for easy loans narrowing

FROM PAGE 1

Moscow has already disbursed about \$6.5 billion.

Some additional charges take the borrowing rate to 8 to 9 percent, finance ministry officials said.

Japan, the largest development partner of Bangladesh among the bilateral donors, gave out loans at less than 1 percent before it changed its official development assistance policy to increase the interest rate for low-middle-income countries in October 2023.

As a result, the new deals with Japan were signed at a 1.6 percent interest rate.

The upward revision of the interest rate also came as development partners have taken into account the country's growing repayment capacity manifested from the growing per capita income.

In the last fiscal year, the per capita income rose to \$2,765 from \$1,130 in fiscal 2011-12.

As of January, the total outstanding external loans of the government were \$66.8 billion, with about 61 percent of the sum disbursed in the last three fiscal years.

Usually, the loan repayment starts after a loan matures, but the interest payments begin immediately after the release of the funds. Since the loan portfolio has ballooned, the debt servicing has widened simultaneously.

Foreign loan repayments rose 32.4 percent in fiscal 2022-23 while interest payments surged 88.8 percent.

The trend has continued into the current fiscal year: loan payments climbed 44.5 percent and interest servicing rocketed 108.2 percent in the first seven months.

Annual loan repayment was less than \$2 billion before fiscal 2021-22. In fiscal 2022-23, it rose to \$2.67 billion.

As per the finance ministry projection, \$3.57 billion will be required this fiscal year to service debts and \$4.5 billion in the next fiscal year.

If the interest rate and loan utilisation keep increasing, repayment will cross \$5 billion by that time, said a finance ministry official.

The escalating interest spending will put pressure on the budget.

"We pay Tk 1 as an interest payment for every Tk 4 expenditure from our budget. Therefore, if we can't increase the revenue mobilisation, our budget will be under pressure," said Zahid Hussain, a former lead economist of the World Bank's Dhaka office.

In recent times, the government has taken various steps to raise taxes. Still, at less than 9 percent, Bangladesh has one of the lowest tax-to-GDP ratios in the world.

To keep the risks stemming from rising debt servicing under check, the government now has two options: one is to collect more revenue or to take on more loans.

"The government should take the decision now. Besides, it should reduce its expenditure. We need to make our state-owned enterprises profitable, cut illogical subsidies and allocate more foreign loans to development projects on a priority basis," Hussain said.

Complicating matters for the government is the unprecedented appreciation of the dollar. The greenback has gained by as much as 30 percent against the taka in the past two years.

Bar too low for arsenic

FROM PAGE 1

was within the WHO standard."

He also said people were now more aware of the dangers of arsenic-contaminated water.

The survey found arsenic in all but 10 districts – Rangamati, Bandarban, Khagrachhari, Joypurhat, Patuakhali, Barguna, Nilphamari, Bhola, Dinajpur, and Kurigram.

Chandpur, Khulna, Satkhira, Gopalganj, Noakhali, and Laxmipur were the worst affected.

Asked whether the "Bangladesh standard" should be revised, he said they were thinking about it.

Arsenic is a chemical substance that forms several poisonous compounds. It is widely distributed throughout the earth's crust and can be released into the environment and water through natural and human activities.

Chronic exposure to arsenic results in various ailments, including dermatologic signs and even skin cancer (especially in palms, soles, and

abdomen), non-specific abdominal pain, and lung and bladder cancer.

In 1963, the WHO fixed the tolerable limit of arsenic in water at 0.05mg/litre. It was changed to 0.01mg/litre in 1993.

But Bangladesh stuck with the 1963 level.

Khairul Islam, regional director of WaterAid in South Asia, said arsenic is worse for the malnourished. When poor and undernourished people consume arsenic-contaminated water over a long time, they risk developing symptoms of arsenicosis, including skin cancer.

"Poor people, who work in agriculture fields as labourers, drink plenty of water and get the symptoms sooner. This is why arsenicosis is popularly known as poor people's disease..." he said.

Khairul suggested that the government reconsider its position on arsenic standards and make it on par with that of the WHO.

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) and Unicef's cluster survey of 2019, at least 11.8 percent of the population – 17.5 million – are exposed to arsenic above Bangladesh's national standard of 0.05mg/litre.

This can damage the normal development of a child's brain and health, it said.

The Directorate General of Health Services does not have any updated information on the number of people suffering from arsenicosis in the country or the state of their treatment.

Kazi Matin Uddin Ahmed, professor at the Department of Geology at Dhaka University, said, "Overall the situation may have improved but there is still a good number of people at risk of high exposure to arsenic, which is a serious threat to public health."

Dermatologist Fakhruzzaman said they get fewer arsenicosis patients nowadays, a probable indication that the situation is improving.

Ex-CU VC hired 172 without ads even

FROM PAGE 1

"The next syndicate meeting will discuss the 37 appointments made by Shireen Akhter on her last working day," he told The Daily Star.

He said the CU syndicate has jurisdiction to cancel or postpone any appointment for violation of the recruitment rules.

Shireen appointed people ignoring a University Grants Commission ban on recruiting staffers on ad-hoc and daily-wage basis, and on master roll without prior UGC approval. The UGC issued a circular in this regard in September 2020.

Sources in the CU said the former VC appointed at least 105 people on daily-wage basis in the last three months of her tenure.

The daily salary of the 37 new recruits is between Tk 330 and Tk 650. They were hired for different posts including security guard, office peon, book binder, computer lab assistant, canteen assistant, senior assistant, junior assistant, pesh imam, sweeper, and cleaner.

This paper could know the names of six new recruits and all of them belonged to CU BCL.

Speaking to The Daily Star, some CU teachers said legal action should be taken after a probe into the recruitment of 37 people.

"She made such appointments several times," said Prof Siraj-ud-Daula, dean of the social science faculty.

He demanded the authorities conduct a probe into all the appointments.

In May 2021, 15 people were hired on daily-wage basis without issuing any circular and holding any exams. The appointments were made for the third- and fourth-class posts of office assistant, library assistant and pump assistant.

In June 2020, an acting security officer was appointed to CU while five people were hired as security guards in December that year. All those appointments were made without issuing any circular and holding any recruitment tests, said sources.

On March 5, 2022, the CU syndicate postponed the controversial appointment of a teacher to the Persian language and literature department.

The development came after audio

clips of five phone conversations of lobbying for the appointments of teachers were leaked. An employee of the university was heard saying – Tk 16 lakh for the post of teacher, Tk 12 lakh for the post of third class employee and Tk 8 lakh for the post of fourth class employee will be required to get appointed.

Contacted, Shireen on Friday said she would not make any comment on the issue.

"I am disheartened by the propaganda activities you all [media outlets] are carrying out against me," she told The Daily Star.

Incumbent CU VC Prof Abu Taher said he wants the UGC to probe the appointments and take necessary steps.

Asked whether he would take any initiative to investigate the recruitments, Taher said, "We will discuss the issue in the next syndicate meeting."

UGC Secretary Ferdous Zaman said they are confident that the university authorities will be able to resolve the issue.

"If they do not do it, we will take steps to launch a probe," he said.