

MY DHAKA

Ramadan price surge: the same old story?

RBR

Two-thirds of the Holy Month is over, and food prices are at an all-time high. Despite strict surveillance by magistrates to control price hikes and adulteration of food, this Ramadan, like always, traders are doing everything against the law.

It is well known that come Ramadan, the entire friendly vibe of traders shifts gear to, "Nile niben, na Nile jaan" (Buy if you want, or else move away). Everyone craves a good meal after a long day of fasting and traders happily take advantage of this weakness.

Recently, prices of Ramadan essentials have increased to as high as Tk 200 per item – a 500 grams packet of powdered milk is now close to Tk 500, which was around Tk 350 even a while ago.

Everyone is aware of the fiasco caused by a minister's statement on dates and I was pleasantly surprised to come across "boroi dates" while shopping for the iftar staple. It took me a while to realise that it is an actual variant of the fruit and not just a trader's spin on the controversy.

The grouchy seller informed us that the round, soft dates that melt in the mouth are called boroi dates and they are amongst the most loved varieties. Upon some further inquiry, it was revealed that the name is a colloquial spin on Barhi dates.

A meagre 100 grams of this is selling at Tk 300. The prices go even higher if you are looking for a superior quality.

Fruits are a must-have as they hydrate your body after a daylong fast and vendors are doing their best in running a shady business. It is not just the price hike but instances are quite common when they hand over rotten produce in the guise of fresh ones.

As it is strawberry season, people relish a bowl of this bright red fruit with Greek yoghurt or hung curd.



ILLUSTRATION: BIPOLOK CHAKROBORTY

However, this season, they are beyond reach – selling between Tk 1,000 and Tk 1,200 per kg! The humble champa kola (hilly bananas) are Tk 180 a dozen and out-of-season oranges are Tk 350.

The neighbourhood, van-wallah boldly stays on his course of "fixed prices", saying that fruits are pricier when bought from superstores. Stay alert while buying from these crafty sellers, as you often get swindled into buying rotten fruits.

I do not even want to go near poultry, fish, beef, mutton, or even vegetables. Price tags of cucumbers, aubergines, coriander, and green chillies have all put on "extra fat".

Butchers made headlines by luring customers to buying in bulk by lowering the price tag by Tk 20 only. This makes me feel that we are always tricked into panic buying and as a result, help con shopkeepers manipulate the Ramadan market. Somehow, they know exactly

how to squeeze out the little extra cash that most of us have in this month.

Given that the market is rolling, there is no need to burden us with these malpractices; it puts a financial strain on our Ramadan budget. I dare not say happy shopping instead the tagline should be cautious and needful shopping only.

Save the bonus – if you can – sweet people of Dhaka!

Tk 93 lakh for two pipe cutters!

FROM PAGE 1

Contacted on February 28, Matarbari Power Plant Project Director Abul Kalam Azad said, "We think the prices are normal even though the customs said the prices are abnormal. The price may seem higher than the market price as the items were tailor-made upon a special order."

The two pipe cutters were made using "special metal" for use in the power plant, he said. "So, the price is high."

However, import documents show that the tools would not be directly used in the power plant. Besides, the tools are freely importable as they are used in all types of construction and routine maintenance work.

When The Daily Star sought a copy of the "special order" placed to the manufacturer for the pipe-cutting tool, Azad, also a director of CPGCBL, could not provide one.

Customs sources also confirmed that CPGCBL did not provide them with any such special order either.

Mohammad Fyzur Rahman, commissioner of Chattogram Custom House, said his office recently received the response from PDB and CPGCBL about the held consignment.

In the letters, the authorities mentioned that the imported products were priced as mentioned in the contract with the vendor.

"They also mentioned that it is common for certain products to have varying prices due to bulk importation. If the departments and ministry concerned have no objections regarding the additional price, then there is no need for any action," he said, adding that such

incidents have occurred in the past as well.

The consignment will likely be released after collecting the duty as the items were not listed for duty-free import by the National Board of Revenue (NBR), Fyzur told The Daily Star on March 17.

CPGCBL appears to have gotten away with importing various goods at inflated prices for the project before, according to NBR records.

Multiple consignments of other agencies containing such products were also cleared through customs in Chattogram and Mongla from October 16 last year to January 15 this year, customs sources say.

The declared value of these products ranged from 5 times to 18,545 times more than the recorded value of the products in the NBR database.

"These consignments were imported under duty-free facility as those goods were brought for a fast-track mega project and the customs released the goods easily as those were imported by a state-run company," said a customs officer who examined at least two such consignments.

The official did not give the name of that state-run company and spoke on condition of anonymity as he is not authorised to speak to the media.

One of the consignments cleared in December last year contained ethernet switches, also known as network switches, for Matarbari project.

The price of the ethernet switches by German brand Hirschmann was \$4,881.83 on the company website, but the import value was shown to be \$205,218 (about Tk 2.3 crore).

Asked why the customs cleared the consignment, another customs official said, "We issued letters to PDB, CPGCBL and the project director for an explanation. Both the authorities informed us in writing that the goods were specially made for the project."

However, the user manual, catalogues and other information about the switches did not suggest the items were custom made.

"If the project implementing authorities [CPGCBL and PDB] are okay with the additional expenditure, then we have nothing to do," he said, asking not to be named to speak candidly on the issue.

Dr Iftokharuzzaman, executive director of Transparency International Bangladesh, said the role of customs officials in blocking the latest consignment is admirable.

"The claim of procuring hand tools like pipe cutters, hammers and screwdrivers by special order is ridiculous. This could possibly be an example of large-scale corruption," he said.

He urged the government to take actions against those involved in the "scheme" and benefiting personally by overpricing products.

Energy expert M Shamsul Alam also dismissed the abnormally high prices of the tools as laughable.

"Such extraordinary prices may seem normal to those who benefit from them," said Shamsul, also dean of the faculty of engineering at Daffodil International University.

"It is not a new phenomenon. But at the end of the day, it is the consumers who have to bear these additional expenses," he noted.

Bureaucrats to blame for cost, time overruns

FROM PAGE 1

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman asked him to in July 1974.

The Daily Star interviewed Mannan, now an MP from Sunamganj-3, over the phone on Saturday. He spoke about faulty project designs, unnecessary public expenditure, slow project implementation, lack of accountability of project directors and engineers, the future role of the finance ministry, the rise of businessmen in parliament, and his regrets and failures.

He said, "Every single bureaucratic tier thinks of themselves as independents, or want to do their work independently. This is a weak link in management and this is the reason why work gets delayed."

Mannan, now the chairman of the standing committee on planning ministry, said, "The finance ministry can allocate money directly to the directorates. Directorates are the main implementation authority... Instead, the finance ministry first allocates the money to the ministry concerned and then the ministry allocates it to the directorate concerned and then the directorate gives it to project directors, who spend the money."

He suggested dissolving the bureaucratic tiers between the top and the implementation authority for quick implementation of projects.

"As soon as the budget is passed, the entire money is approved by parliament. But in reality, after the budget is passed, it is sent to the finance ministry then the ministry publishes the budget book and everyone waits for the printed book to start work. This takes time. We think that if it is not a hard copy, we cannot start our work."

The book can be sent electronically and it takes just a click, he said, adding that the notion that work cannot proceed without the printed book is unacceptable.

Mannan said bureaucrats and ministers should work as a team. "There are bureaucrats behind ministers. Secretaries, joint secretaries, the Prime Minister's Office, the finance secretary, the governor of Bangladesh Bank, the chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commissions are all wise people and we should hear them out. If we hear them out, they will give their best. If we stay away from them, they will stay away from us. This exists in our culture and we need to get out of this. We must team together," the former minister opined.

Mannan, who first became an MP in 2008, said, "We have no trust in each other. This is the weakness in the management and the reason for delays in work."

He slammed engineers and project directors.

"The strange thing is that after a project is passed, they [project officials] come for revisions and demand an increase in the budget. They say things like the project requires two more bridges and four more culverts. Why did you not plan for the two bridges and four culverts when you conducted the survey and prepared the project?

This is because you did not go to the project site or you had the site visit done by a third party.' This is inherent in our system," he said.

A big problem is that the project directors do not stay at project sites, said Mannan, who was the minister for planning for five years and the state minister for planning for five years.

"I shouted and yelled about it several times and even the honourable prime minister instructed them to stay at the project sites. But we could not make it happen."

He said, "We are in a growing economy. Our growth is increasing. We have some inflation. If the annual growth is seven percent and the inflation is five or six percent, it is tolerable. But if inflation gets to eight to nine percent, it is not tolerable."

When asked about regrets regarding his stint as a minister, Mannan said he had some regrets but termed his tenure fruitful overall.

"I must say I was not willing to approve some projects. I disagreed with some expenses and these sometimes bothered me. I thought, 'Why should we spend this money now? Can we not do some of these projects later?'"

Mannan defended the prime minister saying the PM knows more than him and that she has to strike a balance between all and thus some projects were approved. "I carried out her orders diligently."

"I will say I enjoyed working with her and the 10 years of work experience with the prime minister was the best experience of my life. As a team leader, the prime minister never questioned me about why I have done something a certain way, or why I did not do something. She trusted me. Whenever there was any doubt and I felt it should be brought to her notice, I asked for her time and she gave me good advice. She presided over every Ecnec meeting. She used to come in at 9:00am and leave at 3:00pm. She used to discuss with us, eat with us, and talk informally," Mannan said.

Asked about the growing number of businessmen in parliament, Mannan said he did not see anything wrong with it.

"Seventy or eighty years ago, most of the parliamentarians were lawyers and barristers. Before that, feudal lords and bahadurs participated prominently in parliament. I do not find any problem with businessmen becoming lawmakers. Most of them are highly educated. Former police officials, bureaucrats, doctors and other professionals are going to parliament now. People from villages are becoming MPs. A completely rural person like me became MP four times. I don't find any problem with this," said Mannan who now resides in his Dugria village of Shantiganj upazila in Sunamganj.

About the country's current economic situation, Mannan said that the country's economy has gone through a bad time.

Technically it is not a recession, he said, adding that the economy

was recovering as paddy had bumper harvests and remittance and export bounced back.

"Our economy is growing now." Asked if he had any advice for his successor at the planning ministry, Mannan replied in the negative and said both were very wise people and that they were doing well.

Mannan concluded by saying he feels proud to be a Bangalee. "We have achieved many things after our country was liberated. There has been a development spree over the last 15 years and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina handled everything well."

"We need to move forward with democracy, not through the military, or pseudo-martial governance systems. If we have any lacking, we need to practice democracy even more. There is no alternative to it."

Govt to fix

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price of daily essentials at a tolerable level, he said. "We think that we will be able to keep the prices at a tolerable level till Eid-ul-Azha. Though there are some challenges, and you are all aware of them, the government is working on them."

The state minister made the comments at a press conference following a meeting with the stakeholders of the task force on prices of essential commodities at the commerce ministry.

Titu also mentioned that the first consignment of Indian onions is expected to arrive in Bangladesh tonight, and the essential vegetable will be sold at the retail level at Tk 40 per kg.

Bangladesh will import 50,000 tonnes of onions from India, as promised by its government. Of the volume, 1,650 tonnes will arrive in the first consignment via train. Within the next two days, it will start selling via appointed dealers in Dhaka and Chattogram through the open market sale of the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB).

Following the first consignment, the Indian government will supply the remaining onion when Bangladesh sends a letter of requirement.

The ministry had initiated the import of 50,000 tonnes of onions and 20,000 tonnes of sugar from India under a government-to-government arrangement.

The state minister said there is currently no need to import sugar from India because the market has a sufficient supply.

The TCB's sale of some essential goods may have a positive impact on the markets, as prices have recently fallen, he added.

Earlier, on March 15, the Department of Agricultural Marketing in a circular fixed the prices of 29 commodities, including red lentils, chickpeas, egg, onion, potato, broiler, chicken and beef, and asked the traders of all levels to sell the items at the fixed prices.

The prices took effect immediately and will remain in force until further directives, said the circular.

2 Swechchhasebak League men sued for raping teen after confinement

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Sylhet

A case was filed on Friday night against two Swechchhasebak League leaders in Sylhet for allegedly confining and raping a teen girl since January 7.

A woman was also made accused in the case for aiding and abetting the crime.

The accused are Abdus Salam, 40, president of the ward-II Swechchhasebak League unit in Sylhet city; its member Abdul Manaf, 38; and abettor Rekha Begum.

The victim's mother filed the case with Kotwali Police Station on Friday, and police have since been looking for the accused, said Moyeen Uddin, officer-in-charge of the station.

According to the case statement, the victim was at work at a bottle factory in Sheikh Ghat area of the city, and her neighbour, Rekha Begum, introduced her to Abdus Salam, saying he would find her a better job.

On January 7, Rekha took the victim to Salam's house in Sylhet city's Laldighir Par area where Salam confined and raped her over the next 22 days.

As the victim could not be found, her family went to the police to file a general diary, but Rekha obstructed them and took them to Salam, who freed the victim and handed her over to the family.

However, after the victim told her family about the rape, they tried to file a case.

Abdus Salam then again forcefully took her away to a remote area in Habiganj, where the other accused Abdus Manaf, along with several others, raped her.

On March 26, some relatives were finally able to rescue her and file a case with the station on March 29 (Friday).

Moyeen Uddin, officer-in-charge of Kotwali Police Station, said, "The victim was tested at the One-stop Crisis Centre of MAG Osmani Medical College Hospital. She is now with her family."

Debangshu Das Mithu, general secretary of Sylhet city Swechchhasebak League, said, "We have been informed about the case last night [Sunday] and immediately called a meeting. We will take necessary action against the accused."

"We demand a fair probe into the incident. If there is truth to the allegations, we demand exemplary punishment to the accused."

Facebook, YouTube may be blocked briefly

FROM PAGE 1

The minister voiced concerns about the lack of response from social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube to official complaints about rumours and cybercrime.

"Facebook and YouTube do not have offices in Bangladesh, and our recommendations and instructions are being ignored. The social media companies will first be informed about their negligence, and if they fail to comply, the government may block their access temporarily."

"Before that, the government will publish advertisements in the newspaper and inform international organisations concerned regarding the non-compliance."

The minister added that public notices will be served to the companies so that the government is not responsible for any rights violations.

Regarding the upcoming upazila elections, Mozammel said that the upazila elections should be free and fair, adding that the decision not to use the party symbol in the local elections will ensure a level playing field.

"Law enforcement agencies have been strictly instructed to take legal action if any candidate violates the electoral code of conduct."

The public administration ministry has been asked to appoint a sufficient number of magistrates ahead of the upazila elections, he added.

On the recurrence of fire incidents, Mozammel said building codes need to be followed properly during their construction. "Also, flammable objects and hazardous chemicals have not been removed from buildings despite repeated calls. The industries ministry will take steps so that the chemicals are removed quickly [from buildings]."

Mozammel said the committee recommended that investigations be conducted against those whose negligence in duties resulted in these fire incidents and those who approved the risky buildings.

The cabinet committee chairman said a decision has been taken to hold a meeting in Ramadan to take steps to avert fire incidents. The meeting will be attended by the home minister, city mayors, police, and the regulatory authorities of hotels and restaurants.

Concerned about the rise in criminal activity at the Rohingya camps, the minister said, "Diplomatic efforts will be stepped up to repatriate the Rohingya refugees."

On the rising price of essentials, Mozammel said, "The ministry concerned has been asked to bring down the prices of essential commodities."