

12kg LPG cylinder now costs Tk 1,363

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A standard 12kg LPG cylinder will now cost Tk 1,363, down by Tk 30 from Tk 1,393, according to the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC).

BERC at a press briefing said the new price came into effect from 6:00pm yesterday.

According to the new rate, a kilogramme of bottled liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) will be sold at Tk 113.55 at the retail level, down by Tk 2.53 from the previous Tk 116.08.

This adjustment follows a rational scale across various LPG cylinder sizes, ranging from 5.5kg to 45kg, addressing the need for a proportional price revision across different consumer segments.

Furthermore, the price for "auto gas", the LPG variant used in motor vehicles, has also been lowered to Tk 62.53 from Tk 63.92 per litre.

LPG prices marketed by the state-owned LP Gas Company will remain unchanged. This exception is attributed to its local production and the company's minimal market share, which is less than five percent.



PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

This makeshift bridge over the Ramchandrapur canal in the capital's Mohammadpur is the only way for the locals to get to Bosila from Chandrima Model Town. A handful of bamboos are holding up the rickety structure. The photo was taken yesterday.

Cowhide price fixed at Tk 55 per sqft

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government yesterday set the price of salt-cured cowhides at Tk 55-60 per square foot (sqft) in the capital and Tk 50-55 per sqft outside the capital.

Last year, the price was Tk 50-55 per sqft in Dhaka and Tk 47-52 per sqft outside the capital. The decision was made at a meeting at the secretariat to fix rawhide prices ahead of Eid-ul-Azha, when millions of cattle are sacrificed by the country's Muslim community as a part of their religious duties.

Eid-ul-Azha accounts for nearly half of the rawhides collected annually, providing key raw material for the billion-dollar export-earning leather and leather goods industry in Bangladesh.

Mohiuddin Ahmed Mahim, chairman of the Bangladesh Finished Leather, Leathergoods and Footwear Exporters' Association, announced the new rates with State Minister for Commerce Ahsanul Islam Tito at the meeting.

According to the new rates, the lowest price per piece of cowhide has been fixed at Tk 1,200 in the capital and Tk 1,000 outside the capital.

Meanwhile, the price of castrated goat hides has been fixed at Tk 20-25 per sqft while the price of goat hides has been set at Tk 18-20 per sqft across the country this year.

Around 1.7 crore animals are expected to be sacrificed across the country during this year's Eid-ul-Azha. Of the number, 55 lakh are cows and buffalos while the rest are castrated goats, goats, sheep, and other animals.

17,000 workers' fate up in the air

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The reason for them not being able to go is yet to be known.

Against this backdrop, the expatriates' welfare ministry has been trying to reopen the Malaysian labour market and has planned to meet the Malaysian high commissioner in Dhaka on Wednesday to discuss the next course of action for these workers.

Labour migration expert Prof CR Abrar said those responsible for creating an uncertain situation for the aspirant migrants need to be identified first and then punished.

He said many of these workers have left their occupations to get a job in Malaysia, while many others have sold their assets to arrange migration costs.

"There are associated costs that the workers will have to incur in case of their ultimate failure. We're not considering those."

Pointing at the government's compensation plan, Abrar said if the government wants to compensate the workers, it should return the exact amount they had to pay throughout the process, which could be higher than the government-fixed cost.

Malaysia resumed hiring Bangladeshi workers in 2022 after a four-year suspension over allegations of irregularities in the recruitment process.

Briefing reporters at his office on Sunday, Shafiqur Rahman Choudhury, state minister for expatriates' welfare and overseas employment, said as

of May 31, the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training granted emigration clearance to 4,93,642 workers.

"Of them, 4,76,672 could leave for Malaysia by the deadline, meaning around 16,970 individuals were unable to go."

He added that a six-member probe body will, in the next seven days, investigate why workers with valid visas could not go to Malaysia, and will ensure that those responsible are brought to book.

The ministry's Secretary Ruhul Amin said they were planning to return the money to those who could not go.

After signing an MoU on labour cooperation with Malaysia in 2021, the Bangladesh government set a maximum of Tk 78,990 as migration cost.

However, Bangladesh Labour Force Survey-2022 said the average recruitment cost for jobs in Malaysia was Tk 3.40 lakh.

Shariful Hasan, head of BRAC's migration and youth initiatives programme, said the situation was similar when Malaysia had stopped issuing visas in the past, putting a number of workers' future into uncertainty. However, no acceptable solution was found back then and the workers were also not compensated, he added.

"We don't have good examples in this regard," he said, adding,

the government should first assess the situation and then arrange compensation for the workers.

Malaysia announced the May 31 deadline in early March for 14 of its source countries, including Bangladesh.

However, the Bangladesh government responded in May and arranged some additional flights for the workers, which also turned out to be insufficient.

It also requested the Malaysian authorities to extend the deadline, but they did not respond.

Malaysia has been an attractive destination for Bangladeshi migrant workers, who prefer it over some traditional markets in the Gulf due to various factors, including higher wages.

According to the Labour Force Survey-2022, on an average a Bangladeshi migrant worker earns Tk 28,822 a month in Malaysia, and Tk 24,957 in Saudi Arabia.

Last year, Malaysia was Bangladesh's second-largest overseas job market after Saudi Arabia.

Ali Haider Chowdhury, secretary general of Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies, said they will work with the government so that the workers do not have to face losses.

"We will also assist the government-formed probe body investigating the issue," he told The Daily Star over phone yesterday.

Power, agriculture to drive up subsidies

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several times, but the sector will require more subsidies as more power plants, including Rooppur nuclear plant, are ready to produce electricity.

"If the old and inefficient power plants are not phased out, the overall capacity charges will increase, which will deepen the subsidy burden," he told The Daily Star.

The recent mission of the International Monetary Fund also questioned the huge subsidy allocation in the power sector.

However, it is not possible to withdraw subsidies immediately from the power sector as it will hurt the economy. The government plans to increase power prices over the next three years so that the subsidies can be withdrawn, said finance ministry officials.

The subsidy for importing liquefied natural gas (LNG) for FY25 is likely to be Tk 7,000 crore, which is Tk 6,000 crore in the current fiscal year.

The agriculture subsidies were between Tk 5,000 and Tk 7,500 crore until FY21, but it has been on the rise since. In FY23, the allocation was Tk 25,000 crore and it rose to Tk 25,000 crore this fiscal year before it was revised downwards to Tk 18,000 crore.

It is likely to be Tk 25,000 crore next year.

The government usually provides subsidies to the export sector in the form of incentives to businesses. In the current fiscal year, Tk 9,025 crore

was set aside, and it is likely to reduce to less than Tk 7,000 crore, according to the officials.

This is because due to Bangladesh's impending graduation from the group of least developed countries, subsidies will eventually be phased out since World Trade Organisation rules don't allow developing and developed countries to give direct cash aid to exporters.

"We are thinking about the alternate measures in this regard, which will be incorporated in the new export policy," said an official.

Remittance subsidy in the upcoming budget will be unchanged at Tk 6,200 crore, while food subsidy will increase to Tk 7,000 crore from Tk 6,900 crore.

SOCIAL SAFETY NET

Even though economists suggested increasing the allocation for social safety net programmes so that people can cope with higher inflation, the budget in the area is likely to be lower.

Funds equivalent to about 2.5 percent of the GDP are likely to be allocated for social safety net schemes against 2.52 percent currently. However, the allocated amount may increase to Tk 1,32,000 crore from Tk 1,26,272 crore.

The government may increase the number of beneficiaries by around four to five lakh. However, the allowance per person may remain the same, according to officials.

Yet, the allowance may increase for

the beneficiaries in two major groups: senior citizens, and widows, deserted, or destitute women.

In the case of senior citizens, a person will get Tk 600 per month and widows, deserted, or destitute women will get Tk 550 per month.

A top finance ministry official said they would reform the social safety net distribution system in FY25 before expanding the programmes.

In a circular recently, the ministry said all funds for social programmes must be disbursed through the mobile financial service (MFS) account registered with the national ID card of the beneficiaries. This must be ensured by June 30, 2025, it said.

At present, allowances under many schemes are paid via MFS, but often not to the registered accounts of the beneficiaries, which leaves room for irregularities.

The government provides social safety net benefits through around 130 programmes.

Analysts question whether some programmes are truly benefiting the poor. They also say a huge amount is being wasted due to corruption in distribution.

The finance ministry has asked all ministries to submit reports detailing who is receiving the allowances and the goals of the programme.

Based on the reports, the ministry will prepare a report as per the recommendations of the World Bank and the IMF.

Inflation hits seven-month high

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Development, a non-profit institution.

Following the pandemic, the coping capacity of the low and fixed-income groups has fallen significantly, which forced them to cut spending on basic needs, he said.

"Now, they are perplexed. It is a big challenge for the government to protect them."

In the budget for fiscal 2024-2025, scheduled to be announced on June 6, the government should keep enough measures to support these groups, he said.

Echoing his words, Prof Selim

Raihan, executive director of the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (Sanem), said the new budget should concentrate on expanding social safety net programmes as much as possible for the next year.

Referring to a new study, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) recently showed that food inflation in rural areas remained around 15 percent in December, much higher than the official food inflation rate of 9.41 percent.

"The stubborn inflation trend indicates that the monetary policy isn't working properly. Inflation

has just maintained its upward trend," said Mujeri, a former chief economist of the central bank.

Bangladesh Bank has tightened the policy rate repeatedly in recent times to tame high inflation.

"But the situation has taken such a turn that it is not possible to bring down inflation, using the monetary tools alone," he said.

Since March last year, inflation has stayed above 9 percent, BBS data shows.

In order to ensure a smooth supply chain in the commodity market, the government will have to focus on fiscal policy, along with the monetary policy, said Mujeri.

Fresh areas in Sylhet flooded

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Gen Dr Mahbubur Rahman Bhuiyan.

Even the classes and exams at the medical college were suspended due to the flood, said Principal Shishir Ranjan Chakraborty.

Mamun Ahmad, a resident of Laladighirpar area of Sylhet city, said, "Floodwater has entered my house. The whole area has been inundated."

Sadek Hossain, a resident of Jamtala in the city, said, "My house has gone under knee-deep water. All the furniture and household items

have been submerged."

Mahbub Alam, an attendee of a patient at Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College Hospital, said, "We were staying at the hospital's ground floor, as we did not get a bed. We had to shift to the balcony of the first floor as the ground floor got flooded."

Yesterday, Surma was flowing 13cm above the danger level near Sylhet city at 3:00pm, and Kushiara was flowing 48cm above the danger level at Amalshid point under Zakiganj upazila at 6:00pm, according to

the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB).

Some 214mm of rainfall was recorded in Sylhet in 24 hours till 6:00pm, said Dipak Ranjan Das, executive engineer of the BWDB.

Heavy rain may continue in the region for the next few days, said Sylhet Meteorological Office Assistant Meteorologist Shah Mohammad Sajib Hossain.

"If the heavy rains continue, the flood situation will keep worsening," said Dipak.

Celesty posed as mastermind's wife

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killing, said sources in the Detective Branch of Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP).

After recording her statement for around four hours, the court sent her to jail.

Mahfuzur Rahman, investigating officer of the abduction case and also a senior assistant commissioner of DB, produced her before the court yesterday.

Celesty told investigators that at least 10 people took part in the killing mission.

The case was filed with Sher-e-Bangla Nagar Police Station on May 22. Celesty was remanded by DB for 10 days in two phases.

She was arrested on May 23, eight days after she along with Amanullah returned home from India.

Azim went to Kolkata on May 12 and stayed the night at his friend Gopal Biswas's house. He went out the following day saying that he would visit a doctor.

On May 22, India and Bangladesh police confirmed that the Jhenaidah-4 lawmaker was killed on May 13.

'PROVIDE INFO ON SUSPECTS' BANK ACCOUNTS'

Yesterday, the IO applied to another Dhaka court seeking its order to provide him with the bank account information of 10 suspects, including Aktaruzzaman, who is believed to have fled to the US after the murder.

The nine others are Amanullah, his nephew Tanvir Bhuiyan, Celesty, Siam Hossain, Mustafizur Rahman, Faisal Ali Saji, Chelsi Chery, Taj Mohammad Khan, and Md Jamal Hossain.

The court granted the prayer and asked the Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit to provide the bank account information to the investigator.

Amanullah and Tanvir are now in DB custody, while Siam is in Nepal police custody. Jihad Howlader, who dismembered the lawmaker's body, is in West Bengal CID custody.

In another development, a Dhaka court yesterday issued an arrest warrant against Siam, accused of dumping the lawmaker's body.

Md Mahbulul Haque, additional

chief metropolitan magistrate of Dhaka, passed the order after the IO of the case filed a prayer in this regard.

In the application, the IO said Siam was arrested in Nepal. If an arrest warrant was issued against him, it would be easy for the authorities concerned to bring him back home.

The court also asked the authorities concerned to send a copy of its order to Nepal police through Interpol.

Siam went to India via Nepal. He returned to the Himalayan country after the killing of the lawmaker. He assisted hitman Amanullah alias Shimul Bhuiyan in the murder, said investigators.

Speaking to The Daily Star yesterday, Azim's daughter Mumtaz Ferdous Doreen said she secured an Indian visa.

She said she would travel to Kolkata for giving DNA samples to be checked against the suspected body parts of the MP, which was recovered from the septic tank of the Kolkata flat on May 28.

Doreen, however, did not confirm when she would leave for India.

Victim's family

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apparently switched off.

According to the family members, police tortured Afroza and framed her in a drug case as they failed to pay Tk 2 lakh in bribe for her release.

Refuting the allegation of torture, police claimed that they detained the woman with 30 yaba tablets.

Jashore police yesterday formed a three-member committee, led by an additional superintendent of police, to investigate the allegations and the death.

Two rights organisations yesterday expressed grave concern over Afroza's death and demanded fair and neutral probe into the incident and appropriate legal action against those responsible.

Speaking to journalists on Sunday, deceased's son Sabbir, a ninth-grader, said a police team, led by Assistant Sub-Inspector Silon Ali of Abhaynagar Police Station, went to their home around midnight on Saturday.

"Bring out all that you have," Sabbir quoted Silon asking her mother.

"As my mother replied that she had nothing, a female police constable frisked her and found nothing. Then the ASI started beating her up in front of me. At one stage, she fell to the ground. He then tied a lock of my mother's hair to a ceiling fan and tortured her," Sabbir said.

His elder brother Munna said the

police team went to their house at the instigation of some locals and detained her mother on false charges of possessing yaba pills.

"The ASI and some other police personnel tortured my mother and then took her away around 1:00am on Sunday," he said.

He said police demanded Tk 2 lakh in bribe for his mother's release. "As we could not pay the money, they tortured her to death."

Munna said they went to the police station on Sunday morning and found her mother in a bad condition.

Police took Afroza to the upazila health complex upon the family's request.

"They returned to the police station with my mother without doing any of tests the duty doctor recommended," he alleged.

As Afroza's condition deteriorated, she was taken to Jashore General Hospital where doctors declared her dead around 11:30am on Sunday.

Hasib Ali Hasan, a doctor at the hospital, said the woman was brought dead. An autopsy was conducted, he added.

Police filed a drug case against the woman on Sunday morning.

ASI Silon claimed that the allegations made by Afroza's family were false and baseless.

Akikul Islam, officer-in-charge of Abhaynagar Police Station, said police detained Afroza with 30 yaba

tablets and kept her in the lock-up.

She fell ill in the morning and died on the way to a hospital, he said.

The OC claimed that police did not torture her.

FAIR PROBE DEMANDED
Rights organisation Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) in a statement yesterday said the allegations brought by Afroza's family were very serious.

Torture of a person in police custody is illegal and also a manifestation of unprofessional behaviour, it added.

The allegation of demanding bribe by police after an arrest has become a regular phenomenon, the rights body said.

ASK demanded a judicial enquiry into the death.

Another rights platform Manabdhikar Shongskriti Foundation (MSF) said police's statement regarding Afroza's death is merely a procedural statement, which is not at all acceptable or credible.

Torturing a woman after tying her lock of hair to a fan, showing her arrested with 30 yaba tablets after failing to find anything during frisking and interrogation, and demanding Tk 2 lakh in bribe for her release is the manifestation of immorality on the part of police personnel, it added.

MSF demanded an impartial investigation into the custodial death, and justice and accountability for such incidents.