

MY DHAKA



PHOTOS: SHADAB SHAHROKH HAI

## MIRPUR STADIUM MARKET Furniture galore at the home of cricket

TASMIYAH RAHMAN

On match days, all eyes remain glued to the field as the audience gallery roars with cheers and jeers. The premises of Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium sprawl with tight security watching over the cricket-frenzy folks.

On the rest of the days, the plot twists – just a few steps away from the cricket pitch unfolds a different game – where the musky aroma of wood fills up the hallways, and a heap of furniture outlets line up. Batsmen and bowling teams are swapped with shoppers and sellers – all playing to win the best deal!

Located on the ground floor of Mirpur Stadium, the unassuming marketplace stretches around the oval-shaped arena – hosting more than 70 shops.

Inside, bold floral furniture and dramatic lights catch the attention of discerning customers. Meanwhile outside, slow-moving vans hum as

vendors receive new stock and deliver bulk orders to clients. Skilled carpenters are spotted varnishing wooden items as the narrow corridor oozes with the earthy scent of fresh turpentine.

"The market has been around since the early 2000s," says Khalilul Rahman, a veteran seller at Premium Furniture. "Our men can build from any design, and if you take good care, they can last for 10 to 15 years."

From necessary to luxury – carefully crafted items like dressers, sofa sets, plush beds, and TV and display cabinets are available. "Whenever we need furniture items, we drop by the stadium market first," remarks a couple while scrutinising items. "Some of the products are great, if you look at the prices," one of them adds.

Children's furniture is popular here, and so are kitchen items – dish racks, pantry cabinets, vegetable shelves, and containers. Nazia, a Dhaka-based homemaker, relies on this market to

buy kitchen storage essentials as her past purchases have served her well.

The factories behind these outlets are spread across Badda, Rayerbazar, Jatrabari, and Sutrapur.

Seasoned woodworkers blend the trends of luxury brands with affordability to reach a wider range of customers. Most of the furniture are made of Chittagong Segun (teak). Malaysian processed wood and Canadian oak are lighter, and more cost-effective alternatives.

The prices are wallet-friendly, but can vary drastically from stall to stall. For example, Chittagong teak bed prices can span from Tk 30,000 to Tk 75,000 depending on design and size. For beds with processed wood, prices drop anywhere between Tk 17,000 to Tk 25,000. So, before taking the hit as a first-time buyer, inspect the balance between quality and price.

The office furniture of this market is well-known beyond the local people.

"We have customers from outside Dhaka; some are high end corporate clients and wholesale buyers," says the salesman of Ohi Furniture. Just like his outlet, most office tables, ranging from four to seven feet in length are priced between Tk 3,500 to Tk 7,500. Rafi, a computer engineering student, says, "I custom-design my computer tables here – they require some care, but they're worth the price."

A key factor to shop here is to check the longevity to avoid being "bowled out". "Our furniture is built to last," claims a salesman. "But make sure to quickly wipe off any water spillage," he warns.

Even though numerous financial dips have taken down the wickets, this decade-old market has managed to bounce back. So, the next time you are on a furniture hunt, swing by this local arcade by the Mirpur Road. It stays open every day from around 10:00am to 9:00pm, excluding the crazy game days!

## No provision

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and the anti-terrorism law."

The amended ICT Act will become a law once the draft is published in a gazette, he said.

The interim government initiated the process of amending the act as over 1,600 cases were lodged under different laws, including the ICT Act, over different crimes committed during the July uprising. The International Crimes Tribunal has also been reformed.

According to Asif, the definitions of crimes against humanity and genocide in the draft of the ICT (Amendment) Act have also been revised based on the Rome Statute, to which Bangladesh is a party.

"More rights have been provided to the accused so that the accused and the complainants enjoy equal rights. They can bring in as many witnesses as they deem necessary, and question the acceptability of the prosecution witnesses."

The adviser said the amended act will also have provisions for protecting witnesses and providing compensation to the affected people.

"The tribunal can also make audiovisual recording of the trial and broadcast part of it without compromising the privacy of the people concerned," the law adviser said.

Three agencies that can be put on trial under the law include the "disciplined forces", intelligence agencies and auxiliary forces. The definitions of these have also been made clearer, he added.

He said any party in a particular case can also appoint foreign lawyers. Besides, local and foreign observers will be able to observe trials.

Asked if representatives from the indigenous or other minority communities will be included in the Constitution Reform Commission, Adviser Mahfuj Alam said a decision in this regard is yet to be made.

However, the commission has already consulted various groups including the indigenous communities, he added.

Mahfuj also called on the students to share their concerns and demands with the government through proper channels.

Referring to student protests over various issues, he urged the students to avoid being influenced by provocations or engaging in actions that could be detrimental.

"The government is always open to dialogue," he said.

Local Government Adviser Asif Mahmud and Chief Adviser's Press Secretary Shaiful Alam also spoke.

## People to decide

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"They [interim government] will organise a free and fair election after clearing out the garbage left behind by the previous government. We never said we wanted to bring anyone to the election. The media has not presented the matter properly."

Praising BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia's role in the fight for democracy, Fakhrul said, "Begum Khaleda Zia has fought long and hard for the people of the country and for democracy. The previous government kept her in jail in false cases. She was confined to a small, damp cell. That's why her health has deteriorated severely."

"She is ill and will soon be sent abroad for treatment," he added.

## Hunt for OMS food grows desperate

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With inflation staying above 9 percent for 20 consecutive months, the TCB programme offers low-income families an opportunity to secure food they can no longer afford.

As the clock approached 10:00am, the crowd swelled in anticipation of the truck's arrival.

However, a truck finally became visible at 11:49am. Relief seemed imminent, and the customers began to queue up, some shoved each other to secure their spots.

But the truck did not stop at the location. People ran after it, chasing it as far as they could, but to no avail.

"I've been waiting here since 7:00am, and still, I am empty-handed. How long can I stand at my age?" said 70-year-old Jaharana Begum, who ran after the truck.

"I can't keep standing any longer. There'll be no cooking at home," she added, leaving the spot in utter frustration.

As midday sunlight intensified, making it difficult to stand in the open, a fresh rumour of the truck's imminent arrival sparked a frenzy. People hurried to form new lines, with some losing their temper.

Among those waiting were two pregnant women who had walked from Mirpur-6, a half-hour journey on foot.

Finally, at 12:52pm, the TCB truck arrived.

"I came here around 9:00am but was able to buy the goods only at 1:16pm," a sweating Khairun Nahar told The Daily Star.

The 44-year-old woman had left her home in Mirpur-14 at 8:00am to queue up for the subsidised products for the first time. "It is tough to run the family with my husband's Tk 25,000 income," she said. Her husband, the sole breadwinner, is a salesman at a shoe store.

Nahar narrated her ordeal in walking from Mirpur-10 to Mirpur-11.5 to see if another TCB truck arrived there. She eventually returned to the previous location as there was no TCB truck at Mirpur-11.5.

While Jaharana was unable to get the food, Nahar managed to purchase five kg of rice for Tk 150, 2 litres of soybean oil for Tk 200, and 2 kg of lentils for Tk 120 – approximately Tk 385 cheaper than the retail market.

According to TCB data on November 18, soybean oil was priced at Tk 167 to Tk 170 per litre, lentils at Tk 105 to Tk 135 per kg and medium quality rice at Tk 59 to Tk 65 per kg.

Like Nahar, thousands of low-income people in the city scramble for essentials at TCB truck sales points and Open Market Sale (OMS) shops, operated under the food ministry, often returning home empty-handed due to a scarcity or late arrival of the goods.

"Usually, we can sell to about 350 people a day, but nearly 700 people gather at this spot daily," said a TCB goods seller, who preferred anonymity.

"There has been immense pressure from the customers in recent months," he added.

At another TCB spot near Bangladesh Betar in Agargaon, the wait was as chaotic as that in Mirpur-10.

"I never stood in a TCB line before, but the situation has forced me to come here," said Mohammad Himu, 40, a ride-hailing driver.

"I also know some people in this queue who typically maintain a middle-class lifestyle but are now buying subsidised products," he added.

At an OMS shop near Agargaon Colony, Jhorna Begum received 10 kg of food grains after waiting for six long hours from 7am.

"Now, I must hurry back as I am already late," said the housemaid who had to skip her work in the morning for the food.

"All food items are becoming costlier. I come here to save some money as I always struggle to decide which product to cut from the menu," added the mother of three.

Her husband is an electrician, and she earns Tk 6,000 per month working as a housemaid in six houses.

The OMS shop also drew a huge crowd as it was selling flour at Tk 25 per kg and rice at Tk 30 per kg, much lower

does not work at all."

Prof Eusuf called for the removal of inclusion errors and the creation of a proper database through automation. He also suggested expanding the city-centric programmes in rural areas, where food inflation has been higher.

"Amid such elevated inflation, the coverage of existing food-related programmes must be expanded across the country," he said.

He stressed the need to strengthen market monitoring and management, and bring accountability to reduce price manipulation by middlemen.

In July this year, food inflation hit 13-year high, crossing 14 percent, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. The 12-month average inflation reached a double-digit figure in October, indicating significant pressure on consumers.

To help the families combat high inflation, TCB now sells subsidised products from 70 trucks in Dhaka and Chattogram five days a week, while the food ministry operates 964 OMS shops



Women get involved in an altercation over standing in lines in front of a TCB truck near Government Bangla College in the capital's Mirpur. Due to price hike of essentials, the demand for subsidised food is on the rise. The photo was taken on Tuesday.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

than the current market prices.

The visibly irritated customers were sometimes leaving the queues to rest under a shed. People at the front of the lines were scrambling in such a disorderly way that a woman got all covered in flour as her bag leaked.

According to a recent report by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, released by international agencies, including the United Nations, nearly 233 million people, or 26 percent of Bangladesh's population, are experiencing high levels of acute food insecurity.

Professor M Abu Eusuf of Dhaka University's development studies department pointed out that many people are forced to waste their working hours in TCB and OMS queues.

High inflation has forced many new families into poverty, and expanding these programmes would provide some relief, he told this newspaper.

"The one crore family cards are supposed to cover all the poor people according to government data. But it

nationwide, including 110 in the capital. These programmes are run beside the programme known as the family card scheme, under which the government provides subsidised products to one crore families each month.

The government has also included agricultural items in the OMS programme, with 30 sales points across Dhaka city.

To rein in rising prices, the Bangladesh Bank has adopted a contractionary monetary policy and raised interest rates. The government has also taken fiscal measures, including reducing tariffs on essential items such as onions, potatoes, sugar, and eggs.

In November 2023, the food ministry distributed 12.01 lakh tonnes of food grains among poor and low-income people through cash and non-cash programmes, including distribution among public sector employees.

As of November 14 this year, it has distributed 11.67 lakh tonnes of food grains, including 9.32 lakh tonnes of rice and 2.34 lakh tonnes of wheat.

## Wellbeing of children 'under threat' in 2050

Warns Unicef

AFP, United Nations

Demographic shifts, worsening climate change and rapid technological transformation risk creating a bleak future for youth in the mid-21st century, the United Nations agency for children warned Tuesday in an annual report.

"Children are experiencing a myriad of crises, from climate shocks to online dangers, and these are set to intensify in the years to come," Catherine Russell, executive director of Unicef, wrote in a statement marking the release of the agency's annual report.

"Decades of progress, particularly for girls, are under threat."

This year, Unicef uses its report to project forward to 2050 identifying three "major trends" that in addition to unpredictable conflicts pose threats to children unless policymakers make changes.

The first risk is demographic change, with the number of children expected to remain similar to current figures of 2.3 billion, but they will represent a smaller share of the larger and ageing global population of around 10 billion.

While the proportion of children will decline across all regions, their numbers will explode in some of the poorest areas, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.

This offers the potential to boost economic growth, but only if the new young population has access to quality education, health care, and jobs, Unicef notes.

In some developed countries, children could make up less than 10 percent of the population by 2050, raising concerns about their "visibility" and rights in societies focused on aging populations.

The second threat is climate change.

If current greenhouse gas emission trends continue, by 2050 children could face eight times more heatwaves than in 2000, three times more extreme flooding, and 1.7 times more wildfires, Unicef projects.

New technology, particularly artificial intelligence, has the potential to power new innovation and progress but could also widen existing inequalities between rich and poor countries.

## Khaleda to attend

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corruption case.

This marks her first participation in the Armed Forces Day event since 2012.

The Armed Forces Division on Tuesday invited Khaleda to the ceremony, where Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus will be the chief guest.

Armed Forces Day is celebrated to mark the establishment of the forces during the Liberation War in 1971.

The day's programmes will begin with offering of special prayers after Fazr prayers at all mosques in all cantonments and naval and air force bases, seeking divine blessings for the wellbeing and prosperity of the nation and progress of the armed forces, according to an ISPR press release.

Khaleda has been suffering for years from different ailments, including liver cirrhosis, heart, lung, kidney and eye diseases.

She received treatment at the capital's Evercare Hospital under the supervision of a medical board.

The BNP chief was sent behind bars on February 8, 2018, after a special court in Dhaka sentenced her to five years in prison in the Zia Orphanage Trust corruption case.

On October 30 that year, the High Court increased her jail term to 10 years. Later, she was convicted in the Zia Charitable Trust corruption case.

Amid the coronavirus outbreak, the previous Awami League government on March 25, 2020, temporarily freed Khaleda through an executive order. Her sentence was suspended on the conditions that she would stay in her Gulshan home and not leave the country.

The BNP chief was completely freed on August 6 this year after President Mohammed Shahabuddin exempted her from her punishment under the presidential power stated in Article 49 of the constitution.

## Elected govt needed

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needed to rejuvenate the economy, which has been facing headwinds for more than two years because of depleting foreign exchange reserves and high inflation.

Businesspeople should not run after politics, according to Chowdhury, who looks after 32 factories in Bangladesh.

"Let's not waste our time on politics and let the politicians do their job. For me, my business is my politics. My politics is how I can make PRAN-RFL the best company in the world. But political and economic situations influence my decision to do so."

To encourage investment, the government should make rules and procedures easy for investors to comply with, he said, citing the cumbersome process to get trade licences from city corporations and factory and environmental clearance from agencies.

"We need to change our total mindset. We will reap no benefit of establishing a one-stop service window unless we ease the business processes."

Bangladesh is competing with India, Vietnam and Cambodia for foreign investment, so the country needs a competitive edge. So the one-stop service window must be made world-class.

"You see industrialisation is taking place in Dubai even though they do not have any comparative advantage. They have made the business processes so easy that investors from Africa and Europe are going there. But we are failing to attract investors."

Bangladesh can become the best

place for business if the processes are eased.

"We can advance quickly if our political mindset, business mindset, and bureaucrats are aligned together."

Employment generation should be the topmost national agenda, Chowdhury said, adding that the PRAN-RFL Group aims to create 100,000 additional employment by investing in the labour-intensive sectors, especially those that would exit from China.

"We have seen that footwear, bag making, small electric appliances and home appliances will be forced to leave China. Our job will be to see how we can take that opportunity."

Chowdhury lauded the role of the banking sector in supporting entrepreneurs.

Organisations such as PRAN-RFL Group might not have grown were it not for the funding from banks.

"Our banking sector has given birth to many entrepreneurs. When we talk about the creation of oligarchs, we should also remember that numerous entrepreneurs have been created because of this sector."

In the '90s, no bank other than the then-Bangladesh Shilpa Bank would provide loans to the industrial sector. Today, every bank finances industries.

"I think PRAN-RFL is the discovery of Bangladesh's banking sector. We have grown and repaid loans timely. No bank in Bangladesh can say it has dues to the PRAN-RFL. We have borrowed, repaid on time; and sought more loans from the banks for doing business and not for buying cars, homes or to siphon money abroad."