

Haor farmers rush Boro harvest amid flash flood fears

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Boro harvesting is underway across the Haor regions of Sylhet Division and Netrokona, with farmers racing to cut their crops amid fears of flash floods.

Farmers in four Sylhet districts are harvesting even before their paddy fully ripens, anxious after past flash floods, especially the devastating one in 2017. Recent years have only deepened their fears.

According to the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), 4.97 lakh hectares of Boro have been cultivated in Sylhet Division this year – 2.76 lakh hectares in deep Haors. Sunamganj leads with 2.23 lakh hectares, followed by Habiganj (1.23 lakh), Sylhet (87 thousand hectares), and Moulvibazar (62 thousand hectares). In Netrokona, 1.85 lakh hectares were cultivated, with 41,000 in Haors.

Harvesting is in full swing despite uneven ripening caused by early drought and late recession of last season's floodwater. Most paddy is only 70-90 percent ripe.

So far, 1.75 lakh hectares (35 percent) have been harvested in Sylhet Division, including 1.47 lakh hectares in Haor areas, accounting for 56 percent of cultivation in the Haors.



PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

However, the Flood Forecast and Warning Centre (FFWC) noted only minimal flood risk, despite expected mid to heavy rainfall.

"I harvested early, even though my paddy was only 80-90 percent ripe," said Eklasur Rahman from Sunamganj. "Some even harvested at 70-80 percent."

FFWC executive engineer Sarder Uday Raifhan clarified, "We forecasted rain, not floods. Long-term flash flood prediction is difficult due to weather unpredictability."

"We regularly share a three-day flood forecast for general information and a seven-day forecast for officials to act before the time, considering the Boro harvest of the Haor areas," he added.

Similarly, Mamun Hawlader, executive engineer of BWDB in Sunamganj and general secretary of the district committee to protect Boro harvest, said that only rain, not flooding, was forecasted, and the harvest advisory was precautionary.

"The administration urged farmers to harvest only 'ripe' crops, because the rainfall might submerge low-lying areas," he added.

Amid the confusion, the FFWC yesterday forecast mid to heavy rainfall in the northeastern region of the country but stated a 'minimal' chance of flash flood.

Meanwhile, farmers in Moulvibazar and Habiganj voiced concern as drought, pest infestations, and a shortage of labour threaten their harvest.

Ahmed Mia, a farmer from Kawadighi Haor in Moulvibazar, said that prolonged drought and lack of rainfall have dried up vast Haor lands.

However, not all farmers anticipate losses.

Saddam Hossain from Hakaluki Haor said his yield is good, with half his 3-acre field harvested using combine harvester.

However, labour shortage remains a major issue.

Rafiqul Islam of Karab village in Habiganj's Lakhai upazila said that he couldn't harvest ripe crops as there was no one to harvest.

"Local labourers are demanding higher wages,

and even then, they're hard to find. We are waiting for combine harvesters to arrive," he said.

Over 2,000 combine harvesters are active across Sylhet Division, DAE reports. 1,850 of them are local. Harvesting costs range from Tk 1,400-2,000 per bigha.

Adding to worries, many farmers are selling their crops early at low prices, fearing they will not get a fair price.

"I don't have cash in hand. So, I'm selling my paddy in advance. The middlemen are offering only Tk 950-1,000 per maund (37.5 kilograms)," said Tofayel Khan, a farmer from the Dingapota Haor area in Netrokona's Mohanganj upazila.

Others echoed concerns about poor market rates. Shyamal Sarker, a farmer from Bagbari in Sunamganj's Dharmapasha, said he has harvested half of his 2 acre field, but the low market price is making him worried. He said, last year, farmers got Tk 1,100 per maund at the start of the season and later it rose to Tk 1,400, barely meeting the production cost.

However, DAE officials, quoting farmers, said, due to favourable weather, this year's yield is better than the last two years. "We've harvested from the most vulnerable Haors, so floods won't do major damage," said Md Nuruzzaman, deputy director of DAE in Netrokona.

Bimal Chandra Shome, additional director of the DAE in Sylhet Division, agreed.

"Though only a few paddy fields were affected by drought and insects, overall harvest is very good this year. We aim to complete the harvest by April 30. We urge farmers to begin harvesting once their paddy is around 90 percent ripe. This is just a precautionary measure to stay on the safe side, considering the flood risk," he said.

He also said there was no shortage of labourers and the number of combine harvesters is sufficient for the harvest.

[Reporting by Jaydul Islam, Netrokona Correspondent]



DAE data shows harvest progress in the low-lying Haor areas at 51 percent in Sunamganj, 53 percent in Habiganj, 50 percent in Sylhet, 70 percent in Moulvibazar, and 58 percent in Netrokona.

On April 15, the Sunamganj administration issued a high alert based on Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) forecasts, urging immediate harvesting of ripe paddy. All official leave was suspended until harvest completion.

Three defence advisers in the Pakistani high commission in New Delhi were declared persona non grata and asked to leave, Misri said, adding that the overall strength of the Indian high commission in Islamabad will be reduced to 30 from 55.

India also announced a halt to visas for Pakistani nationals under the SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme, our New Delhi correspondent quoted him as saying.

Meanwhile, India is also withdrawing its air, air and navy advisers from its High Commission in Islamabad.

He said any visa under the SAARC Visa Exemption Service issued in the past to Pakistani nationals is deemed cancelled. He also asked any Pakistani national currently in India under SVES visa to leave the country within 48 hours.

The CCS reviewed the overall security situation and directed all forces to maintain high vigil and resolved that the perpetrators of the Pahalgam attack will be brought to justice and their sponsors held to account," Misri said.

"India will be unrelenting in the pursuit of those who have committed acts of terror, or conspired to make them possible," he added.

At least 17 people were also injured in the shooting that took place on Tuesday in the Baisaran valley in the Pahalgam area of the scenic, Himalayan federal territory of Jammu and Kashmir. The dead included 25 Indians and one Nepalese national, police said.

It was the worst attack on civilians in India since the 2008 Mumbai shootings, and shattered the relative calm in Kashmir, where tourism has boomed as anti-India insurgency has waned in recent years.

Meanwhile, Pakistan yesterday said the government has decided to convene a rare meeting of its National Security Committee to respond to diplomatic measures imposed by India over the attack in Kashmir.

The committee – composed of senior civil and military officials and summoned only in cases of external threat or major terror attack – will meet today, Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar, who is also the foreign minister, said on X.

A little-known militant group, the "Kashmir Resistance," claimed responsibility for the attack in a social media message. It expressed discontent that more than 85,000 "outsiders" had been settled in the region, spurring a "demographic change".

Govt employees can be punished

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All these incidents for several weeks led to the delay or disruption in government initiatives, policies, and services.

The proposed amendment is aimed at ensuring discipline during such periods. The act will have provisions similar to those in the "Government Servants (Special Provisions) Ordinance, 1979", which was repealed in 2018 with the passage of the Public Service Act, said the officials.

Abdul Awal Majumder, a former secretary and public administration expert, told The Daily Star that the special provisions in the ordinance were "very strict". Some even described it as a "black law".

But in the current administrative context, such stricter provisions have become necessary, he said.

Asked about the proposed provision of eight days' time for the employees to submit an explanation, Awal said if the government wants, it can terminate any employee found guilty of an offence with an eight day notice.

"There is no requirement for Public Service Commission's opinion or an investigation in such cases," he said.

OFFENCES, PUNISHMENTS

According to the draft, disciplinary action can be taken against any government employee who engages in activities that cause dissatisfaction among colleagues, disrupt discipline, obstruct others' work; remains absent without approved leave or valid reason or refrains from performing duties; provokes others to abstain from work, or prevents them from carrying out their duties; and obstructs another from attending office or performing their assigned tasks.

For these offences, the proposed amendment has three types of disciplinary action: dismissal, removal, and demotion or salary reduction.

The draft outlines the procedure for punishing government employees in question.

It says an accused employee will be served notice and he or she will have to respond to the allegation or attend a hearing in person within two to five days of being notified.

If the accused official fails to respond within the stipulated time or is found guilty even after giving a response, the authorities will impose a specific penalty and provide the employee with an opportunity to show cause within three days.

In case the accused fails to respond to the show-cause notice, or if the response is deemed unsatisfactory to

the authorities, a final penalty will be imposed. However, the draft allows the accused to appeal the decision within seven days to the appropriate authority or, in special cases, to the president within 30 days.

Sources involved with the matter said that under the 1979 ordinance, appeals against penalties could not be challenged in court. The proposed draft of the Government Service Act also does not have any such provision.

The draft states that the president's decision on the appeal will be considered final.

WHY AMEND NOW

A home ministry official said that the involvement of public servants, including cadre officers, in chaotic incidents following the uprising has raised questions.

Due to the absence of a proper legal mechanism, it has not been possible to take strict measures against them, which has hampered the expected improvement in law and order.

"In many cases, government employees are not complying with official directives or are tactically distancing themselves from their responsibilities. This lack of discipline among public servants is slowing down the pace of government operations," the official said.

To address the problem, the public administration ministry has been asked to reinstate the 1979 ordinance.

Besides, several public servants have still not returned to work after the July uprising, which is why many want a stringent law that can hand out punishment quickly to such employees.

As many as 187 police personnel, from DIG to constable ranks, have yet to return to duty. As the government lacks the legal authority to take stern action against those in service for less than 25 years, it feels the absence of a stricter legal framework, the official said.

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An official from the law ministry said, "A law with such special provisions is not prepared with good intention. The motives behind them are often questionable."

Contacted, Additional Secretary (Rules) ANM Moinul Islam of the public administration ministry declined to comment on the matter.

"In recent times, we have witnessed unprecedented chaos in the name of protests, often driven by personal interests. Discipline is yet to be restored in the administration due to the incompetence and weakness of the public administration. Therefore, the

government may be trying to bring back provisions of the repressive ordinance," he said.

"There has probably never been such incompetent leadership in public administration since independence," added Firoz.

A senior official at the public administration ministry, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the amendment was necessary.

"Most of the strict laws introduced during Sheikh Hasina's long tenure have been gradually weakened, which increased the tendency of misconduct among government officials," the official said.

"The government has the authority to forcefully retire any public servant after 25 years of service without showing cause, but this provision is rarely used," the official added.

An official from the Chief Adviser's Office said on condition of anonymity that the law will only be applied to those who violate the rules. Therefore, there is no reason for honest officials to be afraid.

He said enacting a stringent law could create trouble for officials who held key positions under previous administrations.

A joint secretary from the Local Government Division argued that the move to amend the act would curb freedom of thought among government employees, thereby infringing on their constitutional rights.

Citing article 39(f) of the constitution, he said, "Freedom of thought and conscience is guaranteed."

"When the Special Powers Act of 1979 was enacted, the constitution was under suspension. The current government claims to uphold the rule of law, so why does it favour such a repressive law now?"

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Mokhles Ur Rahman, senior secretary of the ministry, told The Daily Star, "The matter is under the jurisdiction of the government."

Pile pressure on Myanmar

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of Earthquake Summit, joined the discussion.

Prof Yunus said Qatar was among the first few countries to immediately provide assistance and support after the Rohingya crisis began in 2017. Qatar also took strong diplomatic positions on the issue in different international forums.

Prof Yunus said Bangladesh is currently hosting about 1.3 million Rohingyas, while 32,000 newborns are being added yearly.

He said prolonged stay of the Rohingyas poses enormous challenges for Bangladesh and making these Rohingyas frustrated. "Rise in criminal activities in the camps and attempts of illegal migration are clear signs of desperation among government officials," the official said.

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Despite numerous challenges and constraints, Bangladesh is giving shelter to such a huge number of Rohingyas only on humanitarian considerations. "Bangladesh considers sustainable repatriation as the only solution to the current crisis."

Bangladesh will organise a "High-Level Conference on the Situation of Rohingya Muslims and Other Minorities in Myanmar" under UN auspices, probably in September 2025 in New York.

Bangladesh expects high-level political participation and cooperation from Qatar in the conference, the chief adviser said.

Yunus said ongoing justice and accountability initiatives in International Court of Justice (ICJ), the investigation of the International Criminal Court (ICC), and the activities of the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIM) regarding the atrocities committed against Rohingyas are "very crucial".

Meanwhile, some serving officials questioned the rationale of enforcing an ordinance from the military regime era, suggesting that such a move might heighten anxiety among civil servants.

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Yunus said, "I want to take revenge for the torture and oppression that you endured in the past through the implementation of the 31 points," he said.

Tariq said, "I want to take revenge for the torture and oppression that was inflicted on me, the imprisonment that I served, the oppression and imprisonment that was inflicted on my mother, and the

way my brother was killed, through the implementation of the 31 points."

The BNP Training Affairs Committee arranged the workshops titled '31 Point State Structure Reform Proposal and Public Engagement' in Rangpur City, Rangpur and Nilphamari districts, and Saidpur upazila.

Tariq called upon his party colleagues to take the party's 31 point proposals to the doorsteps of people across the country, regardless