

MERC TIMES



MEDIA EDUCATION RESEARCH CENTRE,
UNIVERSITY OF KASHMIR

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First Public Darbaar Held at Damhal

❖ Ayad Ullah

Kulgam: First of its kind in the history of D.H.pora, a public durbar was held, where the Deputy Commissioner Kulgam listened to the problems of different delegations of the area. The camp was held in the premises of Tehsil Office Damhal Hanji Pora.

The main demands presented before the DC were the provision of sports stadium, construction of new PHC building, construction of flood protection bund along Vishav river which caused havoc in floods in Damhal Hanji Pora and adjoining area Lanker-Pambay road. With respect to the sports ground, the Auqaf Committee committed to keep available the land and Sports Department Proposed to develop the required facilities of the ground.

Other demands included the construction of internal roads, completion of the Brazloo Bridge, providing the clean and round the clock water supply. Deputy Commissioner assured the people that all the issues would be taken care of and immediate steps shall be taken to address the issues. On the occasion, the DC said that another public camp shall be held very soon and the status of the implementation would be conveyed in that camp. The DC stressed upon the officers of Food department to keep available the rate lists of essential commodities in their stores. The DC directed Tehsildar Yariporta to keep available all the services under PSGA to public.

Among others who participated in the camp were SSP Kulgam, ADC Kulgam, ARTO, officials of R&B, PDD, PHE,, other district officers besides Tehsildar and BDO.

Valley to Witness Mammoth Tourists Rush



❖ Yawar Shafi

Srinagar: Unprecedented rushes of Tourists arrival in Beauty-Bound Kashmir has increased tourism season, not only domestic tourists, but foreigners are visiting the valley in a significant numbers.

Popular destinations like Pahalgam, Gulmarg, and Sonmarg are attracting tourists in large numbers even during the lean season, which has surprised many.

The tourists, besides being enchanted by the beauty of Kashmir, are overwhelmed by people's hospitality. "Kashmir is the best place to spend your hard earning holidays. Not only is the place beautiful, but people here are very nice and helpful", Rai Kumar a Tourist from Punjab said

Local Tour and Travel Chairman Muhammad Hafeez Shalla Said that this year tourism in valley will see an enormous rush and are expecting to grow till Mid-June this year.

However, as per reports, each year at around 75000 visitors visited Kashmir so far. Owing to the promotional activities of the Tourism Department, 927815 tourists, including 28954 foreigners, visited Kashmir in 2015, official data said.

Jammu and Kashmir government is planning to add some of the new tourist destinations to the tourist map include Sinthan, Mazmooch, Apple Town Chiniwooder, Dudhal, Shrunz, Mantalai, Bani Basoli, Ranjit Sagar Dam, Nori Chamb, Seven Lake Rajouri, Burzuhama, and Khanmoh Fossil Park.

Yarigund Cries for Water

❖ Qulsooma Beigh

Srinagar: Yarigund village in Tehsil Narbal, of Central Kashmir's Budgam district is facing acute shortage of drinking water facility. People in the village are forced to fetch water from the polluted nearby Nallah Sukhnag. The Nallah is polluted with

all the sewage coming from the nearby villages.

The inhabitants of this village said that public health engineering (PHE) water tankers used to come once or twice a week in the village which was a lone source for drinking water supply to them, but since years those tankers also got disappeared.

"I daily walk two km to get 20 liter of drinking water from a nearby village for myself, due to my health issues I am not able drink the water we get from the river. It's a big issue, safe drinking water is the basic need and we demand the immediate supply of drinking water." Said saima.

"We are facing lot of inconvenience but the PHE officials are not showing any interest in making pure water supply available to us" said a local

resident, Zahoor Ahmad.

"Recently one of the biggest water supply schemes has been commissioned at village Paharthan, which supplies safe drinking water to all the adjacent villages, but ignoring Yarigund village. We request the authorities to take our matter into consideration so that we can remain away from diseases which are caused by the water we take from the said lake. Cases like Jaundice are at high among the children, which is a matter of concern." Said Bilal Ahmad.

Er. Bashir Ahmad of PHE said, "the department is taking steps to supply filtered water to the village, we are streamlining the things and you will feel the change in next three or four months."



3-Day Legal Literacy Workshop held at KU



❖ **Abid Rashid Baba**

SRINAGAR: Jammu and Kashmir State Resource Centre (SRC) organised a 3-day writer's workshop on "Legal Literacy" here at Gandhi Bhawan, University of Kashmir. Sponsored by department of Justice, Ministry of law and Justice, Government of India, the workshop aims to identify the social issues and bring forth the booklet for the local audience.

The primary aim of the workshop is to awake the residents of the far flung areas who have no knowledge of law. The translated script was written in a regional language. Notably, J and K has its own constitution and there are scores of laws of Indian constitution which can't be followed in the state.

This was stated by Project Officer of SRC Miss Shumaila Shamim. Informing about the various facets of the workshop, she stressed that locals need to know the laws to make the processes in the judiciary transparent.

Laws which don't fall under the ambit of Indian constitution have been discussed in length in the training session.

The workshop was organised under the Project: "Access to justice in North East States especially in J&K." Started in 2012, it aims to reach the wider audiences in far off areas. It caters to the age-group of 15-35 which are being educated about the rights and responsibilities of citizens. Nine books which have been published by MHRD and National Literacy Mission Authority will be translated in a local language.

For this purpose, language experts, translators and trained lawyers have been invited who will be deliberating upon the various social issues and burning topics for next two days.

The workshop commenced with the introductory session of the SRC-which works for the adult education. The aims and objectives of the Commission were discussed. Since J & K enjoys special status under Art.370. So, various laws which are reserved for the J&K only have been discussed.

Two project managers from the Union Ministry Dr. Rakesh Deoli and Dr. Anshul Saxena will chair the session.

KU Hostels: No Entry For Newcomers

❖ **Ikhtlaq-Ul-Rehman**

Srinagar: Kashmir University is again in news for all its wrong reasons. Be it the defunct infrastructure or the malfunctioning. Scores of students protested against the hostel authorities for not notifying the list of new candidates. The aspiring boarders said that they are being denied the hostel facilities for the unknown reasons.

This reporter talked to number of students about the delay of hostels and how they are being made to suffer for none of their fault. Ali Mohammad from North Kashmir's Uri said that "he can't afford the private accommodation outside but he suffers silently."

"We have submitted the forms three month back but no notification has been issued so far." Ali said that it has already been four months.

This border town boy said that he compromises on many issues in a private room in the university premises like the skyrocketing rent charges which are unaffordable for him. "The concerned authorities don't listen to us." He said.

Another student Babar khan said that, "he belongs to the hilly hamlet of Baramulla but he is not being accommodated in the hostel."

"They even dropped our names last year in the newly constructed hostels at Zakura campus." The officials assured us that the Hostels at Zakura will take fifteen days to complete. The workmen at Zakura campus



told us that it will take three or four months for one hostel to complete and at least one year for another. "They are keeping you under dark." Since then the year has passed but the hostels are still incomplete."

Replying to the question, why students have not been allotted hostel so far, Javid-Ul-Aziz, Warden MA Boys Hostel said, "the vacancies in the Hostel are less and the students who have applied for the Hostels are more".

Apart from that the biggest hurdle which is delaying the process is that "the fourth semester students have not yet vacated the hostels. Their exams were running late due to September 2014 floods." He said.

G N Khaki Provost hostels said, "The Fourth semester students will finish their project work within three or four days. After that they will vacate from hostels and vacancies will open for new students."

The officials assured the students that within a week, hostels will be allotted to them.

Muslim Jan is Coordinator IKS

❖ **Ubeer Naqushbandi**

Srinagar: Muslim Jan has taken over as new Coordinator of Institute of Kashmir Studies IKS, University of Kashmir.

Muslim Jan, after completing her Journalism from MERC Kashmir University in 1989 started her career with UNI covering Parliament for two years. "I always loved challenges. This is an added responsibility University has reposed on me, hopefully I will do my best," said Muslim Jan, after taking charge of IKS.

It is pertinent here to mention that Muslim Jan is also a senior faculty member at MERC. She is editor in chief of MERC Times, a fortnightly newspaper. Besides, also she is

credited with providing aspiring journalism students a platform for writing in magazine also. "See students have lot of talent and my job is only to provide them necessary confidence. Basically,

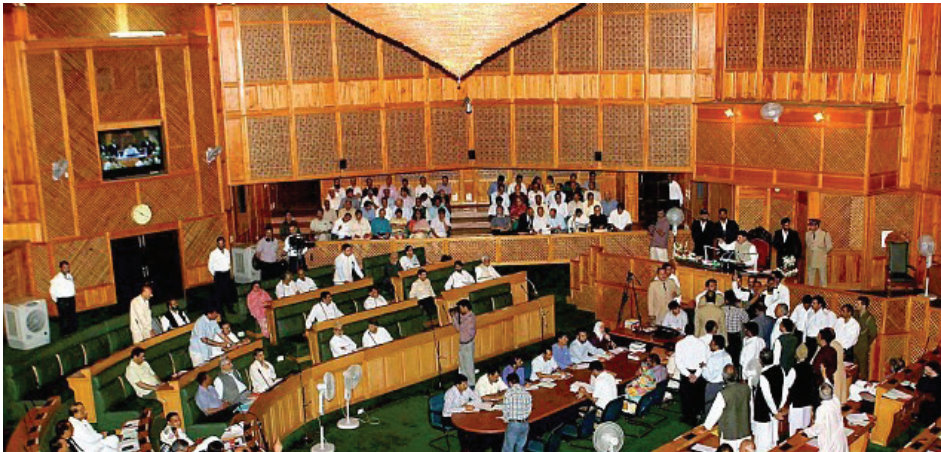
I chisel their writing skills," said Muslim Jan on question of her journalistic career.

Muslim Jan is also member of JK Chapter of SWAM and has been playing a key role in disseminating her expertise in SAARC countries. She also features in programmes run by Doordarshan and Take One.

Muslim Jan's tryst for knowledge has not ended "I am also doing PhD titled 'role of media in connecting SAARC countries and working mutually,'" said Muslim Jan while replying on question.



Council Passes Resolution Seeking IIT, IIM for Valley



❖ IrfanTramboo

Srinagar: The Legislative Council adopted a resolution recommending to the Government of India to sanction one Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) and one Indian Institute of Management (IIM) for Kashmir.

The private resolution was moved by National Conference member Qaiser Jamsheed Lone and it was passed by the House despite the J&K Government appealing to him to withdraw it.

“The government is pursuing these issues. It would be better to withdraw this resolution,” Law Minister Haq Khan told Lone while discussing the resolution in Upper House.

“The government does not outrightly reject the resolution on IIT and IIM for Kashmir, but it is not the proper time to pass it. If the resolution passed by the House is rejected,

it will be a disgrace. So my suggestion to the honourable member is to withdraw it,” Khan said.

However, Lone said that almost all members endorsed his resolution. The resolution was put to vote and it was later passed by a majority in the House.

Earlier, Lone while seeking the support of parties said that Kashmir too should be given IIT and IIM so that people could get better opportunities to pursue careers.

“The demand for IIT and IIM is aimed at bringing prosperity and development to all regions of the state,” he said. “If we can have two AIIMS, we should also have two IITs and IIMs in the state.”

Even though the government wanted the resolution to be withdrawn, a majority of the members from ruling PDP and BJP supported it.

Workshop Titled ‘Eat Rights for a Healthy Life’ Organized

❖ Arif Nazir

Srinagar: The Society for Clinical Nutrition and Metabolism IAPEN India, organized a workshop titled ‘Eat rights for a healthy life’ in the premises of State Vigilance Commission (SVC, Srinagar).

The experts in the event sensitized the employees how to remain fit and healthy by eating balanced and hygienic diet.

Chief Vigilance Commissioner Kuldeep Khuda, Vigilance Commissioners Dr R.K. Jerth and Gous-ul Nisa Jeelani, Secretary SVC Jaitinder Singh, Regional Director IAPEN, and Dietician Gastroenterology SKIMS Dr Nausheen were part of the workshop.

While highlighting the aim of workshop Dr Nausheen said, “everyone should be sensitive health related issues and there should be inclusion of dairy vegetables, fruits, grains and proteins in daily diet.”

She also stressed on the importance of good health towards building a prosperous society. She also said having regular exercise, taking plenty of water and hygienic food besides consuming fruits are good for health and urged upon participants to avoid consuming processed and junk food to remain mentally and physically healthy. Later, the individual consultation was also given to the employees by the experts of the organization.

Appreciating the organizers of the workshop, the Chief SVC said that, “conducting such programs have become imperative in the present fast moving life and work environment. He said stress and anxiety are root cause of ailments besides imbalanced diet, unhygienic and adulterated food and sedentary life.”

‘No Smoking’ In Bank Premises

❖ Shaheen Raheem

Srinagar: After the state government directed for strict enforcement of the tobacco control Act, COTPA 2003, the banking sector in the state has banned smoking at their workplaces and ATMs.

The state’s leading bank, J&K Bank, which functions as a universal bank in the state, issued a fresh circular to all its offices and branches asking its officials to ensure strict ban on smoking, besides seeking action against violators.

“Following the government’s anti-smoking campaign, including Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act (COTPA – 2003), the bank has been issuing instructions from time to time to restrain public and staff members from smoking at workplaces,” the bank said in a fresh order issued from its corporate office here.

“All the sectional and business unit heads are, therefore, once again advised to ensure that smoking is completely banned within the office premises.



NO SMOKING IN THIS AREA

Non-compliance in this regard shall attract strict disciplinary action against the culprits in addition to fine in monetary terms,” the circular read.

“Besides, all these heads are directed to ensure that

anti-smoking signages are placed visibly in all office premises. Total compliance in this regard will be closely monitored,” the circular further said.

The state is emerging as the smoking capital of north India as it is emerging as one of the leading states on tobacco spending.

According to the Global Adult Tobacco Survey, (GATS) Government of India, the state’s monthly spending on smoking tobacco outstrips the national monthly expenditure averages.

Another vital player in the banking sector in the state, the HDFC bank too has ensured COTPA compliance at all its offices and branches in the state.

“We have ensured that ‘No smoking’ stickers are displayed in our branches and ATMs. Besides our branches are no smoking zones as customers are not allowed to smoke inside the branch premises and ATMs,” an official of the bank said in a statement issued here.

Govt. Working on Up-gradation of Colleges

❖ **Hassina Jamiel**

Srinagar: The J&K Government is all together looking for the up-gradation of colleges in the state.

Higher Education Department has constituted a Committee on June 26, 2014 to discuss various issues related to introduction of new additional subjects in Government degree colleges of the State.

Minister for Education, Mr Naeem Akhter said that, "rather than opening new colleges, Government is working on the up gradation of existing college infrastructure that will go a long way in making available world class education to students of the state."

"There are 95 degree colleges functional in the State out of which 22 Degree Colleges were sanctioned during the year 2011. 58 colleges out of 95 are functioning

in their own building and the remaining 37 are functioning in the makeshift arrangements," Mr Akhter said.

"Rather than going for expansion, right now the Government is in a phase of upgrading the existing infrastructure in the educational sector including buildings, laboratories, libraries etc and teaching, non-teaching faculty to make them fully functional rather than expansion," he said.

"It is a good step towards our future. It is good to see that government of Jammu and Kashmir is keen to upgrade the infrastructure", said Javed Ahmed a student

Besides, the Government Degree College Shopian has already been allowed to introduce Commerce stream. There is introduction of new job oriented course in Horticulture and Plant Management.

Prayer Timings Go 'Digital'

JK Meeqat- first prayer timing android app Launched.

❖ **Peer Viqar Ul Aslam**

Srinagar: After successful launch of CITY FM JK online radio app, Eridanus Software Solutions - a Netherlands based Software Company operational in Srinagar added another feather to their cap by launching JK Meeqat- first prayer timing android app in Kashmir.

JK Meeqat app is location based prayer time display and notifications system, the databases has all the districts included for Kashmir region.

Product Manager, Eridanus Software Solutions Danish Iqbal while talking to MERC Times said that our aim is to technologize each sector of Kashmir. "This is the first prayer time android app of Kashmir which shows the user prayer time variations for all the districts. There are many apps on Google play store but they are country centric but our focus is on Kashmir," he said.

Meanwhile, Head App Development

Team Eridanus Software Solutions, Sheikh Sajad Nazir told MERC Times that this app is totally different from all other prayer time apps that are available on Google playstore. "Many prayer time apps are available in the Google market but they didn't give exact timings. But JK Meeqat gives exact timings of every location," Sajad said.

The app is expected to be unique in features "The pro-version will be unique in itself. Surely that will help the users in many ways," Head App Development, ESS, Sajad Nazir said.

Days after its launch, JK Meeqat has become popular among people of Kashmir and has crossed 10000+ downloads on Google Playstore. Firdous Ahmad, a medical representative, is using JK Meeqat app. He said that "the app is very useful to keep a person updated about the prayer timings. Given the nature of my work, the app has been helpful."

Selfie Mania



❖ **Hirra Azmat**

Shadimarg: Mirror, Mirror on the wall, who is the prettiest of them all?" We grew up imagining the speaking mirror. In high school we grew up hearing Silvia Plath calling the mirror a little God. The fairy tale has become true. It is now known as, you guessed it right - Selfie. In case you scoff at it as a foolish infatuation of youth, you couldn't be more wrong. Oxford English Dictionary announced "selfie" as the word of 2014. OED maintains that a selfie is "a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website". The instant click and upload method has made it the most popular trend on various net-working sites. The blossoming of social networking with front facing cameras on mobile phones have made sure that we live without doubt in a selfie age.

The question arising from this popularity is: What makes a selfie so alluring? Azmat Ali Mir, a 21-year old engineering student explains: "Pictures work in ways that words fail to. A selfie is an acceptance of ones' own appearance and mood. Acceptance brings a certain satisfaction, which can definitely perk up one's mood." Is she an exception? Omair Bhat - a 19 year old physiotherapy student explains: "When you look at a selfie it is like dreaming your way backward in time."

Can this personal moment of intimacy be utilized for a larger purpose with respect to the valley? A few trends have already set in. Recently the Delhi elections saw BJP - a major political force trying to woo voters with a selfie with the Prime Minister. Similarly, the Uttar Pradesh government plans to tie selfies with tourism. It plans to promote tourist spots as selfie spots, and

thus ensure a steady advertisement of its tourism potential, and satisfaction of selfie craving. City Lit College London will teach selfies nee self-portraiture from March. Can any of these trends be channelled to understand the valley or its youth? If Lucknow could think along the lines of selfie-tourism why not Kashmir?

"Selfies help me to create a bond with my customers! And it gets easy to communicate with people and take feedback and reviews. I being in hospitality sector found selfies the best way to promote my business and tell my story to masses says Javed Parsa, owner of Kathi junction.

Tourist spots are hardly found wanting especially in the valley, so why can't the selfie potential be explored Perhaps the tourism department should think seriously on these lines. A selfie on the snow clad peaks of Gulmarg or by the lush meadows of Gulmarg will surely spike one's popularity on social networks. There can be no two arguments about it.

Another trend has been outlined by a Birmingham Business School study. It concludes that excessive sharing of photos online could impact relationship longevity and quality. Armed conflict has already set the rot of psychological disorders deep in the valley. Can selfies then be employed as an indication of an underlying disorder? Dr Arif, consultant psychiatrist at Mariam Wellness Center treads the path cautiously. He points out "Selfie obsession hasn't yet found its way officially into academia, yet a predisposing disorder can make it change into a serious disorder." Perhaps mental health experts could consider evaluating the selfies of their young patients. Only time will tell. It is time however, to address the elephant in the room: Selfies are here and they are here to stay!

Traffic Jams Add to Woes of Rambagh Residents

❖ Peer Furqan

Srinagar: Residents of uptown have complained of frequent traffic jam in the rambagh area caused by the diversion of vehicular movement.

Following the closure of the busy Jahangir chowk-rambagh road owing to the construction of the flyover, traffic was diverted through alternate routes

According to the residents of rambagh, the area has been facing the problem of traffic congestion for over couple of years now. They accused the government of ignoring their repeated requests to address the problem.

According to local residents, frequent traffic jams on the route results in congestion and air pollution due to which health related problems have increased.

“My wife has been suffering from chronic bronchitis. The smoke and dust produced by vehicles has worsened the condition of my wife especially after the traffic flow through the area has increased following the floods. I have hospitalized her 3-4 times since then,” said Hamid Khan, a local resident.

“I am myself taking antibiotics and anti-allergic since I was exposed to the dust due to heavy traffic flow,” said Mushtaq wani, a local chemist.

Wani said he sold many masks in the area. “People came to me with throat infections and chest allergies. I recommend them to have masked as I myself do.”

Another shopkeeper, Abdul Majeed said whenever he keeps his products open, dust settles on them. “And people won’t buy those products due to which I have suffered losses.”

Students from this area suffer from distressing situations as they do not reach schools, colleges, and universities in time. “I usually get ready for the school on time but due to diversion our bus gets stuck in traffic. As a result, I reach school late and most of the times miss morning classes,” said Peer Fiza Khurshid a university student.

According to some other locals the miss management of traffic is proving hazardous to their structural properties as well. “As the heavy vehicles pass by this road, it has caused great damage to our houses, said Bashir Ahmad residing in a poorly constructed house.

The locals blamed traffic authorities of ignoring their repeated requests to address the problem.

“We approached the officials many a times but so far nothing has happened,” said Habibullah Khan, Mohalla president.

Hot Beverages ‘Carcinogenic’, WHO reports

❖ Syed Humaira

Srinagar: Drinking very hot coffee and other drinks may cause esophageal cancer, International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) said. AIRC is an agency of UN’s World Health Organization. But it lifted suspicion from a cup of joe at what it said on ‘normal serving temperatures.’

There were hints that coffee may even lower the risk of liver, breast and uterine cancer, (IARC) — but not if consumed hotter than 65 degrees Celsius.

A review of over 1,000 studies concluded that drinking “very hot” beverages was “probably carcinogenic to humans,” said the agency. “It doesn’t matter what the liquid is. What matters is the temperature,” said epidemiologist Dana Loomis, who took part in the review of the world’s most popular hot drinks.

The IARC looked at the full complement of published scientific literature considering if there was a cancer link to coffee or mate, a South American herbal infusion that is also popular in the Middle East. Both had been classified as “possibly carcinogenic to humans” since 1991, when the last evaluation was done.

But evidence gathered since could link neither drink to an elevated cancer risk, said IARC.

Only when drunk hotter than 65 degrees Celsius did any association arise with cancer of the gullet.

“Studies in places such as China, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Turkey and South America, where tea or mate is drunk very hot (at about 70 degrees Celsius) found that the risk of esophageal cancer increased with the temperature at which the beverage was drunk,” IARC said. In lab studies, very hot water at 65-70 degrees Celsius boosted esophageal tumours in mice, said the agency.

However, there is some good news for coffee drinkers.

The analysis found that at “normal” temperatures, there was some data pointing to a lower risk of cancer of the uterus, liver and breast.

Taken together, the available data suggests “there is inadequate evidence in humans for the carcinogenicity of coffee drinking,” agencies report said.

It also scoured studies on the possible link between cancer and other hot beverages, including milky teas drunk in parts of Africa and central Asia.

Some of the data pointed to “significantly increased relative risks for drinking very hot tea and very hot beverages,” it found.

Hot drinks have thus been classified “probably carcinogenic to humans”, the report concluded.

ONE ABATTOIR FOR 1500 SHEEP

❖: Ubeer Naqushbandi

Srinagar: Despite 1500 herd slaughtered in Srinagar city on daily basis, it has only 1 slaughterhouse. While as winter capital has 2 abattoirs but slaughters only 180 herds a day.

This was stated by Minister for Housing and Urban Development, Dr Nirmal Singh, on Tuesday in a written response to MLC Vibod Gupta during the current budget session here.

The government said that it has constructed a total of 23 slaughter houses in J&K with 13 in Jammu province and 10 in Kashmir province.

In urban Kashmir towns, around 780 herds are slaughtered on daily basis while in Jammu province, 200 herds are slaughtered in 11 slaughter houses on a daily basis.

Dr Singh further said that there is



a modern abattoir for Srinagar in the pipeline. The abattoir will be equipped with all the modern facilities, besides having capacity for slaughtering 5000 small animals, said the Deputy CM. The projects shall come up at Rs 2452.36 lakh.

Going by the details, only winter capital has two slaughter houses while

Ramnagar, Batote, Batote, Akhnoor, Jourian, Doda, Bhandarwah, Rajouri, Chenani, Poonch and Udhampur has one slaughter house each.

Similarly, summer capital Srinagar, Bandipora, Kulgam, Budgam, Chrar-i-Sharief, Sopore, Handwara, Pahalgam and Islamabad has one each slaughter house.

Govt to issue ration cards from June 19: Zulfkar Ali



❖ Adil Amin

Srinagar: The J&K Government will start the process of issuance of new Ration Cards to consumers from 19 of this month.

This was revealed by Minister for CA&PD Zulfkar Ali while chairing a review meeting convened here today to review the functioning of the department and preparation made for issuance of new ration cards to the consumers.

The Minister said that the Deputy Commissioners of the respective districts would monitor and ensure that the process of ration card issuance is completed in organized and hassle free manner. He said that people should pay the amount that is printed on the ration cards.

Seeking details for the arrangements made by CA&PD for starting of Mufit Mohammad Syeed Food Entitlement Scheme in July, the Minister asked all the concerned to expedite the procurement process and take all necessary steps in order to make sure that the scheme is launched on due date.

Directing the concerned for compiling the lists of beneficiaries from all the districts of state by June 15 and to start food grains procurement, Mr. Zulfkar Ali said that under the new food entitlement scheme the food grains distribution should be completed by July 5

The Minister asked the officers present in the meeting to ensure that automation of Point of Sale is started at earliest in Samba and Kulgam districts on pilot basis.

Secretary CA&PD Shafiq Raina, Director CA&PD Kashmir Peerzada Mushtaq Ahmad, Director CA&PD Jammu R S Chib and other officers of the department attended the meeting.

State Heads Towards 'Food Crisis'

Low food grain production; land conversion main culprits

❖ Sharoz Khushal

Srinagar: J&K government's decision to implement National Food Security Act (NFSA) in the state earlier this year sparked protests across the Valley with residents in border areas even threatening to cross the Line of Control for food grains, and people in city burning their ration cards.

What lies at the root of the problem is not merely a national law that put cap on food subsidy but Kashmir's own food grain production and the establishment's failure to halt land conversion in the region.

Kashmir is solely dependent on imports through purchase from Food Corporation of India (FCI) for its public distribution, and does not procure anything from the local market. What has compounded the problem is the recent loss of agriculture and horticulture land in towns and villages across the valley.

Kashmir requires 12.96 lac metric tonnes each year for over 76 lakh people, according to the agriculture department. However its local produce is around 10 lac MTs. It has to procure each year about 4.26 lac MTs from the FCI for public distribution. The state Consumer Affairs and Public Distribution Department each month gets 35553.99 MTs of food grain, a majority of it rice, from FCI for distribution among the eligible population under NFSA.

Consumer Affairs and Public Distribution Department Joint Director Mohammad Qasim Wani said the public demand for ration quota was high but they have to distribute only as per the concessional purchase from the centre "We do not procure anything from the local market. We have to procure from FCI and we get it at concessional rates. Agriculture department has its own data. We are not concerned with it," Wani said.

In the Valley where the rice is staple diet, according to official data, 18660 hectares of land that used to be under rice cultivation have been lost as farmers have shunned cultivation since 2013. Development has come despite the government claiming per hectare yield has increased to 64.17 quintals per hectare in 2015.

According to the agriculture department figures, the same stood at 60 quintals per hectare in 2014 and the productivity was 54.19 quintals in 2013. The productivity or per hectare yield has never gone down in the past decade.

The government data remains unreliable as the agriculture department has not updated its figures on area under crop cultivation since 2013 and relies on approximate figures on production and per hectare yield. A simple perusal of the government data reveals the agriculture department takes a particular average number of per hectare yield and multiples it with the area under cultivation.

Divisional Commissioner, Kashmir, Asgar Samoon said the government is going to conduct a special agriculture census to look into the issue and an agriculture policy, though currently in draft stage, has also been prepared to increase production.

"The land has also been acquired for various developmental activities including highways and



railways. High yielding crops are required to increase production. People are now moving towards agriculture from horticulture," Samoon said.

Though people had been turning towards horticulture in recent past but post September 2014 floods the trend too seems to have come down as farmers have cut down trees, and plants producing fresh and dry fruits on about 19315 hectares last year.

Former Registrar, Sher-e-Kashmir University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology of Kashmir, Professor Mushtaq Ahmad blames the rising costs of cultivation and expanding population for the shrinkage of agriculture land. "Traditional varieties do not give much produce and there is a growing competition in the market too as far as quality is concerned. All this has led to current situation," Ahmad said, adding, there is a proliferation of new colonies that has gone unchecked due to lack of any government policy to save the arable land.

The unregulated constructions and subsequent loss of land has not just increased the burden on government's public distribution system but also affected the landscape and turned the otherwise lush green farmlands into "concrete jungles." Officials say currently there is no concept of landscape architecture in the city and town plans in Kashmir.

Chief Town Planner, Kashmir, Town Planning Organisation Iftikhar Hakim who has worked on Master Plans of most towns in Valley said development cannot precede planning but it has been always exact opposite that has happened in Kashmir. "There is need of a government policy to save the land that could be incorporated in the town plans. High density development is needed that can accommodate maximum population. The basic idea is always to protect the land and town planning has to be strengthened," Hakim said.

The state government has now announced Mufti Mohammad Sayeed Food Entitlement Scheme to counter the public opposition to NFSA in the state. Under the new scheme, the consumers would get additional five kgs of ration per person, other than the NFSA entitlement. The new scheme has added an additional burden of Rs 978.89 crore on the state exchequer.

PULWAMA'S GUJJAR BAKERWAL HOSTEL IN SHAMBLES

Ali Saifudin

Pulwama: With the walls sagging, the window panes broken and toilets defunct the Gujjar and bakerwal hostel in South Kashmir's Pulwama district is in pathetic condition with authorities indifferent.

Sources within the hostel said the warden of the hostel has been paying no attention towards the maintenance of the building and most of the time does not stay in the hostel, adding that it was because of maladministration that the hostel has become a 'hell' for the students.

The building was taken on rent eight years ago and since then no repairing has been made in the building housing the hostel. The hostel houses 75 students belonging to tribal areas and 10 faculty members which include the warden of the hostel.

Students from the hostel said that it seems they have been brought from far off villages to be 'reared like sheep' in towns rather than to provide better education to these backward students. "The administration in the hostel is managed by persons who least bothers about the health and hygiene of students," said the students.

Deputy Commissioner Pulwama, Neeraj Kumar said that "several people from the community met me and told the sufferings of the boarders in the hostel."

Vice Chairman Gujjar and Bakerwal Advisory Board, Zaffar Chowdhary said that the warden of the hostel has mismanaged the hostel and they were going to change warden of the hostel soon. He said "We are making arrangements to shift the hostel somewhere else."

HOSTEL BOARDERS CRY MISMANAGEMENT

Zakir Hussain

Students from Kargil at Nowshera Girls Hostel Srinagar are suffering due to poor facilities and mismanagement. Girls of the hostel raised concerns, but the authorities are in 'no-response' mode.

The Hostel started in the year 2012 with the accommodation facility for 35 students, but today around 37 students are living in the same hostel more than the accommodation limit with the same infrastructure with much poor facility, poor security and poor management.

Shugufta Banoo, President of

hostel students said, "Our hostel is in very poor state than the other Kargili hostels of J&K, we almost feel alienated and subordinated here."

"The local administration is giving zero attention to us. Whenever we complaint against such issues like mismanagement and maltreatment, we are threatened to shut down the hostel." She said.

During Chief Executive Councillor's (CEC) last visit to hostel, we were promised to provide a security guard for the sake of safety, but that promise is also unappealed, she added.

"The bathroom drainages are still unloaded since 2012 unlike other hostels where the drainages get cleared away every year. This is the very big issue we as a girl face, when we reported it to the council, they didn't pay heed." said Sajida Banoo a hostel resident.

"The open electric wires are future dangers, whenever it rains there is high probability of electric shock. We reported Commissioner Electrical Haji Asgar Ali Rangeen but as others he also came up with same false promise," she added.

Talking to the MERC Times Councillor LAHDC Kargil Ghulam Rasool Nagvi Councilor said, "I will personally visit the hostel, interact with the students and will sort out the problems".



AXES FALLING ON ALMOND TREES

Syed Shahriyar

Lucrative prices to Apple crop in south Kashmir's Pulwama district has raised axe on other fruit trees particularly Almonds. Farmers have shifted to Apple cultivation, clearing swathes of Almond land for the purpose.

Experts say that low prices for almond than apple and less import duty is responsible for the decrease in almond cultivation "The import duty per Kilogram almond is Rs 35 only while the same for apple is half." Said

Ghulam Qadir, a farmer.

"It means that if one kilogram of almond costs 200 in USA it would cost only 235 in India, but if Apple is sold in USA at the same rate it would cost 400 in Indian market, thus making Indian customers to buy Kashmir apple," said Munib-ur-Rehman, a scientist in horticulture department.

The trending monoculture, as per experts is adversely going to affect the economy of valley as the farmer would have no other avenue to sustain if Apple crop fails.

"Monoculture can fetch gains for short term only but in the long run it

would prove disastrous and could leave us in a situation with the farmers in Punjab and other states," said Waleed Ahmad, a horticulture expert.

As per experts, Almonds and other dry fruits have a good prospectus, as these are found only in few place of the world. However, Apple is grown at a large scale in China, Australia, Iran and other countries.

"The production of apple in these countries is hi-tech and has very high production. Each hectare there produces more than 70 tones and here the production is only 13 tons per hectare," said Munib.

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