

# New Year, new books

Free textbooks distributed among students amid hartal

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The morning chill was compounded by a foggy haze all around. A countrywide hartal was also on to set the scene for a bleak day. Yet nothing could deter the school kids from rushing to their schools to receive the New Year gifts awaiting them.

No preparations were there to make a show of the programme. Yet the exuberance displayed by the kids

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turned every school ground into a veritable carnival.

Students of primary and secondary grades thus began the New Year with new textbooks in their hands, overcoming the fear of violence that every hartal entails.

It was sheer happiness writ large on their faces on getting the textbooks. Some held those up in the air with joy while some were flipping through the pages. The refreshing smell of new books hung in the air all around the schools.

This was just a glimpse of how the first day of the new academic session and the much-awaited "Textbook Festival Day" went all over the country yesterday as the government started distributing over 32.63 crore copies of textbooks to more than 4.44 crore students from class-I to class-IX.

The textbook distribution will continue for the next seven days. So the schools that are yet to start admitting new students will have to hand the new books over to their pupils within this period.

Of the total books, around 11.55 crore are for primary-level students, 14.82 crore for secondary-level students, 3.09 crore for Dakhil (secondary level of madrasa) and Dakhil vocational students, and 1.79 crore for ebtedai (primary level of madrasa) students.

In the wake of recurring textbook crisis in previous years, the government in 2009 had taken the decision of free book distribution at both primary and secondary levels. Starting from the next year, the government so far has distributed around 155.83 crore copies.

In 2010 the government had distributed around 19 crore copies of books to 2.76 crore students whereas the number has risen to 4.44 crore students this year.

Education Minister Nurul Islam Nahid and Primary and Mass Education Minister Mostafizur Rahman officially inaugurated the festival by releasing balloons at Motijheel Government Boys School in the capital at around 10:30am. They also handed over books to the students.

Students along with their parents started coming to the school from 8:00am when the playground was still enveloped in mist. More than a thousand students from six institutions attended the festival.

The students played drums and

waved placards and balloons, cheering all through the inauguration. Parents and teachers too joined the ceremony.

"I woke up early and came here with my father. I am very excited," said Ismat Ava, a class-V student of Motijheel Government Girls School.

Biva, a class-IX student of the same school, said she initially thought she'd not attend the festival due to the hartal. "But I really could not stay home," she said.

Aryan, a class-VII student of Motijheel Government Boys School, had more reasons to be elated. "I am very happy to get the new books from a minister," he said.

A little kid from Aryan's school said he'd persevere to do well in the exams.

Parents were also happy. "Since the students are getting the books right on time, teachers should start teaching right away so that the syllabus can be completed," said Kamal Ahmed, a parent.

In his speech, the education minister said they had delivered all books to the schools in time despite many obstacles.

Nahid also mentioned that the dropout rate had been reduced significantly thanks to the distribution of free textbooks.

The primary and mass education minister said the anti-liberation forces tried to foil the textbook festival with their hartal. "But amid hartal, the textbook festival is on all over the country and the students' presence dashed the hope of those who tried to enforce it," Mostafizur said.

Elsewhere in the country, the distribution was held under supervision of people's representatives, government officials and school authorities.

Reports from our correspondents in Munshiganj, Sherpur and Pirojpur districts draw a similar picture of festivity and cheerfulness during the free book distribution programmes.

However, students in some places, especially in Feni and Tangail, said they did not get all the primary and pre-primary textbooks yesterday.

In Jhalakathi, students and parents alleged that teachers of Purbo Rajapur M Hossen Registered Primary School took Tk 25 from each student before giving the textbooks.

Taslima Nasrin, head teacher of the school, denied the allegation saying they took the money for organising a sports event.