

Farming family faces bleak future after deadly Australian bushfires

REUTERS, Wandella
There is little that Australia's deadly bushfires didn't take from dairy and cattle farmers Tim and Warren Stalway.

For nearly two days over New Year the brothers battled fierce blazes that tore through the family's farms, the flames igniting on multiple fronts and wiping out almost everything in their path.

The pair's father, Robert, and brother, Patrick, died trying to defend their properties. All the family farms were burned to ashes and debris, and hundreds of cattle killed.

"I keep saying to myself that it's not that bad, but it is that bad. It's fucking terrible," said Tim Stalway, 42, shaking his head in disbelief as he looked at his burnt out dairy farm near the town of Cobargo in New South Wales state.

Warren Stalway fought back tears as he described his anguish at discovering his brother and father had died, and how other farmers donated their hay to keep his farm going.

"People have just turned up, they all want to help," he said. The scale of the recovery facing the two fifth-generation farmers is huge. Destroyed machinery, felled trees and blackened farmland were surrounded by miles of damaged fencing on Tim Stalway's farm. Metal tanks were melted and hay and cattle sheds worth tens of thousands of dollars were flattened.

Salway lost 170 cows, including one that was so badly burned that it had to be shot.

"They're the only heifers I've got left," he said, pointing to 30 cows gathered curiously, the sky behind them blanketed by haze from fires still burning on the other side of the valley.

"I've got no heifers for the next three years, they all got wiped in the fire. Just in cattle, if I look to replace them you're looking at A\$300,000 (\$207,000)." Monster bushfires have razed bushland equivalent to the size of Bulgaria since the start of October, killing 28 people, destroying more than 2,500 homes and killing millions of animals.

"The noise of it was like jumbo jets ... It snapped trees in half," Tim Stalway said of the fires that destroyed much of the Cobargo farms. "I watched the flames get sucked down the hill, there was a boom, an almighty thump. It was my dad and my brother. It's like a bomb's gone off." Warren Salway's wife Helen, who has cancer, took refuge in a nearby town while he raced through smoke-filled lanes to get back to his cattle farm, twice running his truck off the road.

The bushfires crisis deals a further blow to farmers already struggling following a three-year drought, which has been credited with fuelling the fires.

"It's just annihilated us," said Warren Salway. "It's just numbness." Salway spent more than a day using a bulldozer and excavator to bury 145 cows and 80 sheep. Many of the cows he found

alive had to be shot due to their burns.

"Years and years of breeding and you see them laying in a heap just dead," he said. "That's what you live for, your animals." Tony Allen, a former local mayor whose own farm had a lucky escape, said the crisis was a wake-up call for policy makers to support an industry already doing it tough.

"The decision is do you want to keep an industry going, do you want to feed Australians with Australian food, or do you want to let the industry just evaporate and live off imported product?" he said. Tim Salway said quitting was not on his mind, but he doubted the family business would survive into a sixth generation.

"I've got four kids and unless it improves, none of them will be taking this over," he said. "Why do you want to do that to them?"



There is little that Australia's deadly bushfires did not take from dairy and cattle farmers.

India plans new law to protect foreign investment

REUTERS, New Delhi

India is planning a new law to safeguard foreign investment by speeding up dispute resolution, aiming to attract more capital from overseas to boost stuttering domestic growth, two officials with direct knowledge of the matter told Reuters.

In a 40-page initial draft, India's finance ministry has proposed appointing a mediator and setting up fast-track courts to settle disputes between investors and the government, one of the sources said.

"The idea is to attract and promote foreign investment, but a major issue for investors is enforcement of contracts and speedy dispute resolution," said the official.

The draft proposal is aimed at diffusing investor mistrust around the sanctity of agreements, which has worsened recently after some state governments decided to review approved projects, or threatened to cancel contracts. Both officials declined to be named as the proposal is not public, and is still being assessed by different ministries and regulators.

A spokesman for the finance ministry did not respond to a request for comment.

Foreign investors have highlighted the enforcement of contracts as one of their biggest concerns, said the second official, adding that improving on this front would also reduce litigation for the government.

While investors can still rely on the existing legal system to settle disputes, it often takes several years for cases to be decided or settled.

Investors previously had an option to take India to international arbitration courts under bilateral investment treaties (BITs) the government had agreed with dozens of nations. But, after suffering setbacks in overseas arbitration matters, India has allowed most of its treaties to lapse, giving investors little to fall back on in case of major disputes.

BITs are agreements between two

countries that give foreign investors protections, and among other things, legal recourse via international arbitration in disputes with a government.

India is entangled in more than 20 such overseas arbitration cases - the most against any country - brought by companies including Vodafone, Deutsche Telekom and Nissan Motor Co for disputes over retrospective tax claims and breach of contracts.

If India loses these cases, brought before most of its BITs lapsed, it could end up paying billions of dollars in damages.

The government's thinking is that India may not need to sign investment treaties with other nations if the new law, which is modelled on a BIT, can give confidence to investors, said the first source.

A domestic law, however, cannot be a substitute for a BIT as its scope cannot allow investors to take their case to international arbitration, the sources said.

Though India's overall ranking in the World Bank's ease of doing business report has improved to 63 from 142 in 2014, it still ranks poorly - 163 out of 190 - when it comes to enforcement of contracts.

The latest example of a contract wrangle is a dispute between the Andhra Pradesh state government in southern India and renewable energy companies. The state has been curtailing power procurement from the companies, citing high prices, and has pushed to renegotiate its supply contracts with them.

Investors including Goldman Sachs, Japan's SoftBank Group, Singapore's GIC Holdings, the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority and France's Engie have invested in renewable projects in the state.

The draft proposal for the new law includes a plan to set up an investment tribunal in state high courts that will take up cases as a matter of priority, or will see if the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT), which also handles insolvency and corporate matters, can handle it.

Hong Kong protest shoppers show their true colours

AFP, Hong Kong

Seven months of unrest have taken a heavy toll on many Hong Kong businesses, but pro-democracy protesters are now seeking to reward shops and restaurants that support their cause by building a "yellow" economy.

In contrast, "blue" pro-government and pro-China businesses are frequent targets for vandalism or boycotts.

At Fu Kee Noodles in Wan Chai, diners slurp wonton under the watchful gaze of a gas mask-wearing Pepe the Frog, which has become a mascot of the pro-democracy movement.

"This is a yellow shop, the boss supports the protesters, so we decided to come," said a 47-year-old advertising employee calling himself Gilbert.

"The most important thing in Hong Kong now is that we need to help each other, especially when the government does not help us." Posters and post-it notes with pro-democracy messages cover the wall by the cashier.

Owner Kwong Chun-hin, 30, told AFP he hopes the yellow-blue tagging will become a trend "because this is good for us. I mean not just my shop, I mean all shops".

Some businesses openly advertise their

sympathies, undeterred by the possible loss of revenues. Apps and websites advise users on which way shops and restaurants sway.

At her bakery in Sai Wan district, Naomi Suen sells cookies and mooncakes decorated with protest slogans.

"I don't know the exact definition of the yellow economy. I am just doing what I can to support Hong Kong people," Suen told AFP. In Hung Hom, site of some of the most violent clashes of the movement in November when students barricaded themselves inside a university, diners queuing outside Lung Mun Cafe expressed a similar sentiment.

"We want to support this restaurant because it supports the whole movement... supports democracy," said a 26-year-old man named Justin.

Eateries, shops and other properties branded "blue", meanwhile, have been attacked by black-clad vandals wielding petrol bombs. Many Chinese bank branches are boarded up or protected by metal shutters after their windows were smashed.

Dozens of restaurants belonging to local catering giant Maxim's were ransacked after the daughter of the group's founder labelled protesters "rioters" and said she had given up on Hong Kong's young.

BDCOM brings high-speed internet

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"The speed and service quality will not deteriorate depending on the number of households of a team. Everyone will enjoy the same broadband connection."

Initially the service will be offered in Dhaka, Chattogram, Cumilla, Barishal, Bogura, Jashore, Mymensingh, Sylhet, Rajshahi, Khulna, Tangail, Rangpur and Kushtia, he said.

"In the next phase, another 19 districts will be added to the list."

Currently, BDCOM has 10,000 household connections apart from corporate networks up to union level.

The problems created by the local muslimen are restricting the company to expand its services all over the country, he said.

In April last year, the company launched the country's first internet protocol television service and also offered super high-speed package of about 100 Mbps.

Bangladesh moves two notches up

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Clearly, much more work remains as women in many countries have only a fraction of the legal rights of men, holding them back from opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship.

The eight areas covered by the index are structured around women's interactions with the law through their careers: mobility, workplace, pay, marriage, parenthood, entrepreneurship, assets, and pension.

The regulatory environment for women's economic participation has improved over the past two years, with 40 economies enacting 62 reforms that will help women - half the world's population - realise their potential and contribute to economic growth and development, the WB said in the statement.

Still, the results are uneven - women in many countries have only a fraction of the legal rights of men, holding back their economic and social development.

Better performance in the areas measured by the Women, Business and the Law index is associated with more women in the labour force and with higher income and improved development outcomes, the WB said.

Of the 10 economies that improved the most, six are in the Middle East and

North Africa, three are in Sub-Saharan Africa and one in South Asia. While there was considerable progress, the Middle East and North Africa remain the region with the most room for improvement.

Eight countries now have a score of 100, with Canada joining Belgium, Denmark, France, Iceland, Latvia, Luxembourg and Sweden due to a recent reform in parental leave.

In South Asia, four economies enacted seven reforms in four areas. Nepal introduced a new labour law that prohibits discrimination in employment, paternity leave and new pensions regulation.

Three other countries also enacted reforms: Pakistan and Sri Lanka made progress in the area of parenthood. In India, the state of Maharashtra eliminated restrictions on women's jobs.

"This study helps us understand where laws facilitate or hinder women's economic participation. It has incentivised countries to undertake reforms that can eliminate gender imbalances," World Bank Group Chief Economist Pinelopi Koujianou Goldberg said.

"Achieving equality will take time, but it is encouraging that all regions have improved. We hope that this research will continue to serve as

an important tool to inform policy making and level the playing field for women."

Advanced economies continue to make progress on the indicators. Of the 40 economies with scores above 90, 27 are OECD high-income economies. The Czech Republic and the United States reformed laws related to paternity and parental leave, giving parents more opportunity to share childcare responsibilities, while Italy and Slovenia equalised pension benefits between men and women.

The areas of workplace and marriage saw many reforms, especially in the enactment of laws that protect women from violence. In the last two years, eight economies enacted legislation on domestic violence for the first time. Seven economies now have new legal protections against sexual harassment in employment, the WB said.

Twelve economies improved their laws in the area of pay, removing restrictions on the industries, jobs and hours that women can work. Globally, the most frequent reforms were in areas related to parenthood, with 16 economies enacting positive changes. Reforms included expansion of the amount of paid maternity leave available to mothers, introduction of paid paternity leave and prohibition of dismissal of pregnant employees.

More tax facilities for private power plants

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The foreign employees who work in the power plant will get a three-year tax holiday. Besides, the company will get tax waiver on interest of foreign loan, royalty, technical know-how and technical assistance fee.

The total power generation capacity of 137 public-private power plants is 19,000 megawatt (MW).

Of them, 80 private power plants have generation capacity of 9,000 MW, according to power division official.

Another 28 private power plant are under construction and 12 plant are waiting for approval stage.

Besides, 18 public sector power plants are under construction, whose generation capacity is 8,900 MW.

The Awami League took intuitive to increase power generation through private sector after coming in power in 2009 as the government enacted a special act to reduce severe power crisis in the country. At the same time, the government aimed to reduce dependency on private sector power generation.

The government is providing subsidy of about Tk 10,000 crore every year. On the other hand, the government has to increase the price of power, raising the expenditure of general people. A high official of the power division said they will not reduce the dependency on private sector for power but they will ensure the least cost of power.

India desperate to dump unwanted imported onion

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India opted for onion imports to increase the domestic supply and check prices. The government is importing onions through state-run trading agency from Turkey, Afghanistan and Egypt.

Onion prices shot up due to a 25 percent fall in domestic production.

The Daily Star yesterday tried several times to reach Commerce Minister Tipu Munshi but failed to get through to him due to the parliamentary session.



Rupali Chowdhury, managing director of Berger Paints Bangladesh, opens its first Experience Zone at Dhan Bazar in Laksam yesterday. The zone offers a "touch and feel" experience through hundreds of shade panels of different brands and cater to all painting requirements.

Gamblers having a field day at bourse

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A top official of the Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission yesterday said they keep a close watch on the market and whenever they spot unusual activity or violation of rules and regulations they take actions.

"Already we have done it many times in the recent past," he said requesting anonymity as he is not authorised to speak to the media.

Investors also should be careful because at the end of the day it is their own money that they are putting in the stocks, he added.

Reforming tax through digital sophistication

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Similarly, the European Commission's Directorate-General for Taxation and Customs has started to explore the use of blockchain technology as a potential foundation for the Digital Single Market.

While the security and reliability offered by blockchain technology are very attractive for the administration of tax compliance, a widely applicable solution has yet to be developed.

However, the move to a more digitally sophisticated tax compliance system has already been a significant success for those tax authorities that have embraced technology.

Tax authorities should assess the appropriate level of technology for their organisations, considering the complexity of their tax system, the availability of technology infrastructure and the digital maturity of their taxpayers.

The introduction of any new technology for administering tax will require significant

planning and coordination, and we encourage tax administrations to consult widely with their taxpayers and with other tax administrations that are already further along the path of technological change.

Employment of human workers is going to change significantly in the coming years. Quite a few traditional jobs are expected to be performed by individual freelance service providers instead of regular employees. This will create additional tax compliance requirements as these individuals will have to comply with service delivery related taxes, such as VAT.

On the other hand, artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics are going to automate a good number of manual labour-intensive jobs in the coming years. The taxes earned from labour-intensive activities are likely to fall in the short term due to the higher degree of automation.

Agile tax authorities that are able to respond to these changes faster will be able to perform

better in such situations. Instead of getting impacted by AI-driven disruption, tax authorities are embracing AI to improve the quality of tax assessments and prevent tax evasion. Such technology-led initiatives are expected to improve overall tax collections in the coming years.

It is also important for a responsible tax authority to educate taxpayers on the new tax system.

With the rapid growth of the economy, tax collection is expected to grow in future. NBR has also undertaken quite a few transformation initiatives to make its tax collection and compliance processes more technology driven. Additional focus on digitalisation will help in further improving its citizen-centric services and improving the country's tax-to-GDP ratio.

The writer is a Partner at PwC. The views expressed here are personal.

Accord to finally pack bags in May

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This prompted a host of factory owners to file a case against the inspection agency with a court in The Hague, where the headquarters of the Accord are located.

However, the case was transferred to Bangladesh as it was too expensive for the owners to frequently fly to the Netherlands and engage lawyers. Finally, the case was moved to the Supreme Court, which extended the Accord's tenure in May last year to February 13 this year.

However, the Accord and BGMEA came to a mutual understanding in September last year to form the RMG Sustainability Council (RSC) to continue the remediation and monitoring of the factories.

The RSC is a tripartite compliance and safety monitoring body of the apparel sector, formally formed by brands, union leaders and factory owners.

Both the Accord and BGMEA yesterday

signed a joint communique to form the RSC. The RSC will operate within the regulatory framework of the laws of Bangladesh, closely co-operating with and supporting the regulatory functions of the Government of Bangladesh.

It will retain all health and safety inspections and remediation, safety training and complaints handling functions currently carried out by the Accord, the communique said.

All existing transparency features of the Accord will be maintained, including full public disclosure of inspection results and remediation activities.

All operations, staff, infrastructure and functions of the Accord Office in Dhaka will be transferred to the RSC and the RSC will appoint a chief safety officer, retaining the same independence, autonomy, authorities and reporting requirements practiced by the Accord.