

Curb on Middle Eastern flights hits fresh vegetable exports

SOHEL PARVEZ

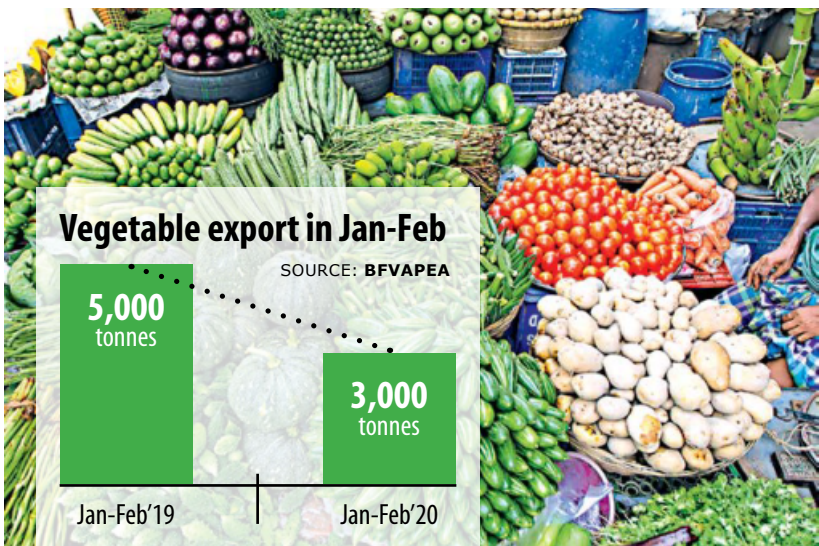
Exports of fresh produce from Bangladesh have been hit in the wake of flight restrictions imposed by several Middle Eastern countries to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, exporters said yesterday.

The Middle East, home to more than five million Bangladeshi migrant workers, is the biggest destination for the locally grown vegetables and fruits, which brought home \$100 million in the last fiscal year.

The perishables are shipped by air cargoes and their shipment began to suffer after Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and Oman slapped entry restrictions on international flights, including those from Bangladesh.

“Our exports to these destinations have come to a halt because of cancellation of the flights. We are facing the curb just at the beginning of the main export season to the Middle East,” said Mohammed Monsur, general secretary of the Bangladesh Fruits Vegetables & Allied Products Exporters’ Association (BFVAPEA).

Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are two major export destinations for fresh vegetables and fruits and 60-70 tonnes



of the perishable are shipped through air cargoes from Dhaka daily.

The shipment has nearly halved over the last one week, Monsur said.

Exports of vegetables slumped 40 per cent year-on-year to 3,000 tonnes in the January-February period of 2020, BFVAPEA data showed.

This was the first blow for vegetable and fruit exporters, who were upbeat about exceeding the annual shipment

targets for the current fiscal year of 2019-20, thanks to increasing demand for local fresh produce.

Fresh fruits and vegetables export bounced back in fiscal 2018-19, ending four-straight years of slump, on the back of higher demand and efforts aimed at improving farming and packaging practices in order to produce and ship disease-free crops.

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WB to give \$100m to help fight coronavirus

JAGARAN CHAKMA

The World Bank will provide \$100 million to Bangladesh to help the country take preventive measures in the face of global coronavirus pandemic.

The Economic Relations Division (ERD) forwarded a proposal to the WB for the fund following a request from the health ministry as the government seeks to contain the virus in the country.

The ERD sent the proposal to the WB yesterday and the bank informally assured the government of the fund, Md Shahabuddin Patwary, additional secretary of the ERD, told The Daily Star.

“I hope we will receive a response regarding the fund within a week and the fund will be provided under a fast-track package,” he said.

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Coronavirus leaves tour operators distraught

TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY

About 30 per cent of the staff employed by tour operators in the country may lose jobs if the coronavirus pandemic does not subside anytime soon, according to various tour operations.

Besides, the other sectors involved with Bangladesh’s tourism industry such as hotels, resorts, restaurants and airlines will also face a similar situation if the condition remains the same, they said.

“I can tell you for certain that each company will have to go for the golden handshake with 30 per cent of their staff members. If this situation continues, we will not survive for long,” said Md Rafeuzzaman, president of the Tour Operators Association of Bangladesh (TOAB).

Rafeuzzaman made these remarks during a press conference styled ‘Effect of Coronavirus on Bangladesh Tourism Industry and BTTF-2020’, organised by TOAB at the Jatiya Press Club yesterday.

The association also postponed its biggest programme of the year, the ‘Bangladesh Travel and Tourism Fair (BTTF)’, to October 29-31 due to the looming coronavirus threat.

Tourism boards and agencies from several countries usually participate in the fair, which was supposed to be held in Dhaka on April 3-5.

TOAB also called for numerous steps to be taken in order to publicise the country’s popular tourist spots.

This includes providing special incentives and loans at low interest rates for tour operators, reducing taxes levied on travellers, the removal of ‘unnecessary restrictions’ at airports and increased funds.

On March 13, the World Travel and Tourism Council said that up to 50 million jobs in the travel and tourism sector are at risk due to the global COVID-19 outbreak.

The global travel sector could drop by as much as 25 per cent in 2020, according to data from the WTTC, which represents the world’s private travel and tourism industry.

This is equivalent to there being no travel worldwide for three months and this could lead to a corresponding reduction in jobs by about 12 or 14 per cent, the WTTC said.

As of 9:00am GMT yesterday, the number of confirmed coronavirus cases worldwide stood at 1.68 lakh, while 6,501 people across 142 countries have already succumbed to the novel virus, according to a tally compiled by AFP.

Three new individuals were diagnosed with COVID-19 in Bangladesh yesterday, raising the current number of confirmed cases in the country to five. However, three people who were infected previously have made full recoveries, officials said.

PAINTING A GRIM PICTURE

China, Japan, Singapore, India and Italy are big markets for both outbound and inbound tour operators in Bangladesh. Therefore, their businesses have been hit hard by the coronavirus issue, Rafeuzzaman said.

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ADP outlay trimmed 4.8pc

JAGARAN CHAKMA

The government is going to slash this fiscal year’s development budget by 4.8 per cent from the original outlay mainly due to slow implementation of projects funded by foreign assistance.

The revised allocation for fiscal 2019-20’s annual development programme (ADP) is now Tk 192,921 crore, which was Tk 202,721 crore in the original budget, according to a draft of the planning ministry.

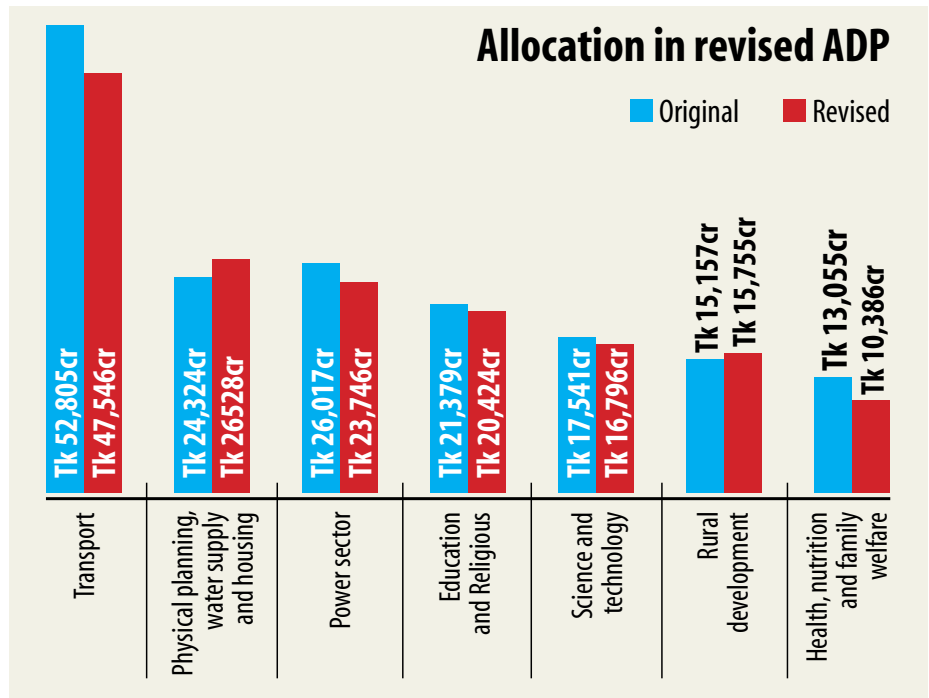
Already Tk 79,785.86 crore or 37.09 per

cent of the original allocation has been spent from July till February.

Besides, the planning ministry will recommend that autonomous bodies and corporations of the state, such as the Chattogram port, spend Tk 8,277.56 crore out of their own pockets for self-development.

This is basically government money and so if the amount is taken into account, the revised development budget will end up becoming Tk 201,198.56 crore.

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Onion prices drop on entry of Indian variety

DWAIPAYAN BARIUA, Cig

Prices of locally grown and imported onions have seen a sharp fall in Dhaka and Chattogram, as India has recently resumed export of the vegetable after a five-and-a-half-month ban.

Prices dropped 15 per cent to Tk 35-50 a kilogram at the retail levels in Dhaka yesterday from the previous day, according to the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh.

Onions grown in Pabna were sold at Tk 30 a kg yesterday at Khatunganj wholesale hub, down from Tk 35 a day earlier. The prices of the Meherpur variety also fell to Tk 26 per kg from Tk 30 on Sunday.

Businesses were found selling the Burmese ones at Tk 35 a kg, which was about Tk 47 on Sunday, Tk 52 on Saturday and Tk 65 a week earlier.

The Egyptian and Turkish onions have seen the highest fall in prices.

The Egyptian onions were sold at Tk 25 a kg, down from Tk 32 on Sunday, Tk 40 on Saturday and Tk 45 a week before, said Md Ali Talukder, owner of M/s Meher Traders at Hamidullah Miah Market that houses a number of commission agents and onion warehouses in Khatunganj.

The wholesalers in Khatunganj began releasing onions at cheaper rates as truckloads of the Indian variety have already started entering Bangladesh since Sunday.

Over 200 trucks with Indian onions have reached Bangladesh through Hili, Sonamasjid



and other land ports in the last two days, said Mohammad Idris, general secretary of Hamidullah Miah Market Traders Association.

Some of those trucks would arrive here by Monday night or Tuesday morning.

“The importers have asked us to get rid of our stock as early as possible, as they sense that their demand would decrease in the presence of Indian onions,” said Mohammad

Faruk, a commission agent and owner of M/s Ira Traders.

The wholesalers have been trying to sell off the imported onions, which normally have the least number of customers, Idris said.

Some traders have been offering Indian onions at Tk 37 per kg, although the onions are not that good in quality.

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Bangladesh on the right track to becoming a digital economy

Says a top official of American tech giant Cisco

MD FAZLUR RAHMAN

American tech giant Cisco Systems has doubled its headcount and office space in Bangladesh and opened a depot for spare parts as it looks to expand footprint in a country steadily moving to become a digital economy.

“We firmly believe that Bangladesh will be a very digital economy for what the government and the private sector are doing, and we are absolutely geared up to be the digital partner of choice,” Sudhir Nayar, managing director for sales for India and the Saarc at Cisco, told The Daily Star in an interview in Dhaka last month.

Cisco has been present in Bangladesh for two decades and was one of the first global IT companies that made investment in the country.

Today, it has more than 1,000 customers in Bangladesh and serves them through more than 100 partners.

“This is the testimony to the investment we have done over the last 20 years. The customers and partners are our strength. As we continue to grow into the digital economy, their numbers will multiply.”

Deepening digitalisation in Bangladesh has prompted the technology company to expand its footprint.

Bangladesh has the ninth largest mobile penetration in the world and the fifth largest internet user base.

“These two are fundamental for any digital acceleration because people need to be able to get information, whether they want to read or get or share something and small businesses need to promote their products because for everybody global market is the market.”

As per the World Economic Forum,



Sudhir Nayar

Bangladesh will be the 24th largest economy in the world by 2030.

“Digitalisation is going to fuel the journey.”

About 120 ICT companies are exporting more than \$1 billion worth of products to 35 countries. There are 6 lakh active freelancers in Bangladesh catering to the world’s digital economy and generating \$100 million worth of revenue for themselves.

“This is a humongous number. This is really what digitalisation can bring to the country.

Bangladesh is already in the middle of a big transformation. We really want to be bridge.”

Cisco has significant presence in Bangladesh: 88 per cent banks are running their core IT network and infrastructure on Cisco systems.

The government set up a national data centre a couple of years ago in a major stride towards building Digital Bangladesh and the centre is powered by Cisco.

Some 80 per cent of internet in Bangladesh

goes through Cisco products. Video-enabled governance is connected by the US firm.

Bangladesh is the first country in Saarc that is implementing e-passport and Cisco is also a part of the core infrastructure.

“This is a sign of a very progressive government and a growing economy,” Nayar said.

In Bangladesh, Cisco works with all leading private sector organisations. A lot of organisations are implementing their private clouds.

Banks are the most mature segment to adapting to IT and IT-enabled services in the country. The government is also adopting more digital technologies than the private sector now.

“In fact, the government is now leading the adoption of digital technologies,” Nayar said.

In order to become digitalised, every organisation, public or private, needs to decide which parts of their businesses they want to digitalise.

For digitalisation, according to Nayar, three big pillars are needed: technology, process and people and culture.

The three things really need to work together for anybody to have a pure digital platform.

He lauded Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s digital vision.

“It is not easy to start using digital technologies. But she is using it quite effectively to run her local governance and inaugurating a lot of events.”

According to Nayar, when it comes to digitalisation, it is not only about large projects, about governments or big private organisations.

“The next growth in Bangladesh has to come from small and medium sectors,” he

said, adding that there are six million small- and medium-sized enterprise organisations in Bangladesh.

In the last quarter, Bangladesh was the fastest growing country for Cisco in the Asia and the Pacific region, recording three times more growth than in India.

“This is not a small achievement by any stretch of imagination. It is a very high growth country for us,” said Nayar, who previously worked for Sun Microsystems, Oracle and Microsoft before joining Cisco three years ago.

He, however, did not give any specific numbers on revenue and growth.

The company has continued investment in partners and students training on digital technologies.

He credited the company’s continued investment, the growing number of clients and partners, and digital drive of banks, retail companies, hospitals and hotels for the growth of the company.

The company has set a target to acquire five new customers every week.

“This is also a true example of digitalisation. Earlier, we used to talk about what we will do in a month, a quarter or a year. Now everything is about days and weeks because new companies are coming up every single day.”

He also talked about the big trends that are coming up in the local market.

One of them is e-commerce, which is currently about \$1.6 billion and the projection is it would grow to \$3 billion by 2023.

“This is really huge. All these require technologies and the world is their market and they are not confined to any single geography alone.”

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