



**Crop protection assoc elects top brass**

STAR BUSINESS DESK  
M Sayeduzzaman of Mimpe Agrochemicals and AHM Sadrul Alam of Aungkur Traders have recently been elected president and general secretary of the Bangladesh Crop Protection Association respectively. The association also elected Manzurul Huda of Sweet Agrovet as vice chairman. Md Marufuzzaman became the association's joint secretary general and SM Khaled organising secretary.

**Initiative rolled out to increase investment**

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Three organisations have recently launched a programme to increase investment in social business and environmental sectors. The organisations are German-based financial consultancy firm Roots of Impact (ROI), local business consulting firm LightCastle Partners (LCP), and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) in Bangladesh. The platform - Biniyog Briddhi: Scaling Impact Enterprises of Bangladesh - was rolled out through a video conferencing, according to a statement. Derek George, deputy director of the SDC, Bjoern Struwer, founder and CEO of ROI and Bijon Islam, CEO of LCP, attended the launch. The four-year programme is aimed at increasing capacities of impact investors and entrepreneurs dealing with social businesses and environmental issues, the statement added. The entrepreneurs, who will play positive role in facing environmental challenges, will get financial assistance under the programme. Initially, applications will be accepted from impact entrepreneurs and accelerator programmes through the initiative's website: www.sie-b.org.

**Poor Indians flee to villages as coronavirus measures take heavy toll**

REUTERS, Mumbai  
Thousands of poor city migrants whose livelihoods have collapsed due to India's coronavirus measures headed back to their villages on Saturday, raising fears that the exodus could carry the virus to the countryside. About one fifth of India's 271 confirmed coronavirus cases has been reported in Maharashtra - home to Mumbai, the country's largest city and economic powerhouse. So far, India has registered four deaths due to the virus. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has urged Indians to stay at home to fight the outbreak. Maharashtra state authorities ordered on Friday the closure of all shops and offices, apart from those providing essential services, until March 31. For Indians who drive rickshaws or run food stalls, the economic shock of such control measures has been huge, pushing them to leave for family homes where they typically do not pay rent and food is cheaper. "Work has stopped. I'll go back and work on the farm," said Rakesh Kumar Gupta, 40, who sells

mosquito nets and was heading back to his family house in Uttar Pradesh. On Saturday, hundreds of people, many young men wearing masks and lugging backpacks, jostled in long queues to board trains at Mumbai's Lokmanya Tilak Terminus station. India's state-run railway operator laid on 17 special train services starting on Friday to ferry people

out of the Mumbai area to eastern and northern India, spokesman Shivaji Sutar said. Health specialists say large-scale population shifts to rural areas could hasten the spread of coronavirus in India, a country of 1.3 billion people with weak public health care - especially in the countryside. India has about 120 million migrant labourers, according to

labour rights group Aajiveeka. "This really is the beginning of community spread, assuming there haven't been forerunners," said Dr. Rajib Dasgupta, a professor of community health at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi. The Indian Railways spokesman said they were screening passengers and had trained workers on board in case of emergencies. But anxious travellers were cramming into overcrowded trains, according to a Reuters witness, likely increasing the chances of infection. Highlighting the risk, the Ministry of Railways on Saturday tweeted that a dozen people who had travelled by train in the last few days had tested positive for COVID-19 on Friday. "Passengers are advised to avoid non-essential travel for the safety of fellow citizens," the ministry added. India's Health Ministry did not immediately respond to requests for comment. The virus is underlining the difficult trade-offs countries must make when trying to contain the pandemic, with many fearing that India's poorest people will be severely hit.



Migrant workers and their families board an overcrowded passenger train, after government imposed restrictions on public gatherings in attempts to prevent spread of coronavirus disease, in Mumbai yesterday.

**Plunge in smartphone shipments: report**

AFP, San Francisco  
Smartphone shipments took an historic plunge last month as the novel coronavirus disrupted supply and demand, industry tracker Strategy Analytics said on Friday. Global smartphone shipments dropped to 61.8 million in February, a 38 percent drop from the same month a year earlier. "February 2020 saw the biggest fall ever in the history of the worldwide smartphone market," said Strategy Analytics executive director Neil Mawston. "It is a period the smartphone industry will want to forget." Smartphone supply and demand plummeted in China and across Asia, and slowed in the rest of the world, Mawston added. "Some Asian factories were unable to manufacture smartphones, while many consumers were unable or unwilling to visit retail stores and buy new devices," said Strategy Analytics. Despite tentative signs of recovery in China, global smartphone shipments are expected to remain weak through March. "Hundreds of millions of affluent consumers are in lockdown, unable or unwilling to shop for new devices," the industry tracking company said. "The smartphone industry will have to work harder than ever to lift sales in the coming weeks, such as online flash sales or generous discounts on bundling with hot products."

**Clamour for hand sanitisers leaving manufacturers breathless**

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Regardless, people can't stop seeking out for hand sanitisers. Even after ramping up production and distribution hand sanitisers are going out of stock as soon as the stores are putting them out on the shelves, said Jesmin Zaman, head of marketing of Square Toiletries, which sells 'Sepnil' brand hand sanitisers. Square is now making 10 tonnes of hand sanitisers daily and supplying to the market without any delays. A month ago, Square could sell at the most one tonnes of hand sanitisers. "Even in January, five to 10 lakh people in Bangladesh were aware of hand sanitisers at best." But suddenly, millions of people were looking for the item. "We have the machinery. We are increasing our production capacity with as much raw materials and packaging materials we are getting," Zaman said. The correspondent got hand sanitisers in 7 out of the 17 establishments visited in Dharmnondi. And they were mostly in the supermarket chains. And save for one, the brands that were found available were less known even a week ago. Some have started making hand sanitisers recently, while some firms are trying to make some good margins from the newfound business opportunity for the hygiene item. Yet fast imports are not possible as flights to and from import

destinations such as China have become infrequent. "My supplier informed that he would be unable to take any responsibility in case of flight delays," said Abdul Mannan, who was trying to buy some hand sanitisers from China. He runs a store in the port city of Chattogram. He said imports by sea is time-consuming and businesses are not sure that the heightened demand would persist once the supply arrives. But imports have increased recently, he said. Yet supply has been too low to meet amplified demand. Khulshi Mart, a standalone supermarket in Chattogram, could hardly sell 240 pieces of hand sanitisers in a year, said its procurement manager Mohammad Aurang Zeb. "But in the last 10 days, we sold more than 5,000 of them. The demand is so high that we can't meet them," he said. Khulshi Mart is selling one hand sanitiser to each customer in order to ensure a higher number of people can get the hygiene product for personal and family protection, just like many supermarkets in Dhaka. In Lavender in capital's Gulshan area, hand sanitisers were kept behind the till, and one customer is allowed one. A shopper was seen asking for five small packs of hand sanitisers at the counter of Wellbeing Pharmacy at Dhanmondi. But he was sold three.

In the Unimart store beside the pharmacy, no hand sanitiser was seen on the shelves. "It is all finished for now," said a salesperson of the store. However, hand washes were available on the shelves. But there was a tag that read that only two pieces per customer were allowed. The salesperson said the store will put a limit on hand sanitiser to one each customer once supply comes through, she said. "By rationing the items, we will be able to serve many more customers," said Rasad Kabir, manager of operations of Unimart's Dhanmondi branch. A similar scenario was seen at Meena Bazar and Shwapno on Dhanmondi 27. No hand sanitiser was on the shelves. One could get limited quantity but from behind the counter. "We are doing this so that all can get and one cannot hoard the scarce items," said Sabir Hasan Nasir, executive director of ACI Logistics that owns the supermarket chain Shwapno. Shwapno, the country's biggest supermarket chain, is also restricting the number of 50ml bottles of alcohol-based hand rub, Hexisol, for each customer. Nasir also urged people to avoid buying excess quantities of other essentials amid the panic. "We want to assure that there will be no crisis of products," he said, adding that Shwapno will also consider limiting the sales of rice to prevent stock piling. Alcohol-based hand rubs are mostly used

in hospitals by medical professionals, said M Mohibuz Zaman, managing director of ACI Healthcare. "The demand went through the roof. We are now delivering five times more than before," he said. ACI, which accounts for more than 90 per cent of the hand rub market, increased its production capacity to make nearly 100,000 pieces of hand rubs daily. "We are trying our best, but the demand is just too high to meet." All manufacturers have expanded their capacity. "The pharma industry is trying to produce as much as possible and trying to purchase a higher amount of raw materials," Zaman added. Seven local manufacturers are producing hand rubs now, according to Mostafizur Rahman, director of the Directorate General of Drug Administration. They are producing hand rubs in three shifts now after DGDA director general held meetings with the manufacturers. Currently, more than 5 lakh pieces of hand sanitisers are made daily. "We have given permission to four more companies to make sanitisers and hand rubs and also gave import permission to seven firms. As we have sufficient manufacturers and production capacity, the crisis that has been created temporarily would be over," said Rahman, adding that DGDA will also fix the prices.

**No duty on PPE, hand sanitiser and testing kit raw materials**

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The move comes amid growing fears that a full-blown COVID-19 outbreak will occur in the country that has a less than ideal supply of coronavirus testing kits and PPE equipment such as gowns, surgical masks, goggles and hand sanitisers to tackle the situation. Some of the items, for example hand sanitisers, are already hard to come by as panic buying has left manufacturers struggling to cope with the sudden surge in demand. With the general public scrambling to stockpile the product, not only has the retail price for hand sanitisers gone up, but the cost of raw materials used for manufacturing it has also risen. Although the virus was first spotted in Wuhan, China in December last year, it has since spread across the globe. As of yesterday, the pandemic claimed the lives of more than 11,000 individuals worldwide. Physicians and public health experts in Bangladesh recently voiced concerns over the government's inadequate measures that have put the country at risk of a mass outbreak. As of last week, there were about 2,000 coronavirus testing kits available in the country. Yesterday though, the World Health Organisation had 10,000 testing kits shipped to Bangladesh from Singapore. The initiative to remove import tariffs on equipment used for coronavirus testing and treatment was taken to increase the availability of such products, the NBR officials said. The zero-duty import scheme is likely to continue for three months, they added.



Zahid Maleque, health and family welfare minister; Abul Kalam Azad, director general of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), and Zahida Fizza Kabir, CEO of Sajida Foundation, attend an event yesterday where the foundation and Renata inked a deal with the DGHS to strengthen the efforts to curb the spread of the coronavirus. The 50-bed Sajida Hospital in Narayanganj will be arranged as quarantine and treatment centre for the patients infected with the virus and 10,000 personal protective equipment will be distributed to health service providers.

**ADB keen to write a cheque of \$500m**

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Parkash held several meetings with Kamal on the issue. The ADB also held a meeting with the health ministry. The development lender would help Bangladesh procure testing kits, personal protective equipment for doctors and equipment for hospitals. The ADB has presence in many countries and assured Bangladesh of using its reach to help the country source the items. The Manila-based multilateral lender also wants to know how many hospitals will be dedicated to treating coronavirus-affected patients, Kamal said last week. The commitment from the ADB came as Bangladesh yesterday confirmed the second death linked to the coronavirus outbreak. On March 18, the government confirmed the first death from the novel coronavirus. Yesterday, four more people tested positive for the virus, taking the total number of confirmed cases to 24. The ADB support would also be used to provide social protection to vulnerable groups. The coronavirus pandemic could

trigger a global economic crisis, destroying up to 25 million jobs around the world if governments do not act fast to shield workers from the impact, said the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in a report last week. Regardless of size, all firms are facing serious complications from the coronavirus fallout such as immense declines in revenue, insolvencies and job cuts, said Tuomo Poutiainen, country director of the ILO Bangladesh. "Sustaining their day-to-day operations will be particularly difficult for small and medium enterprises," he said, in a statement to The Daily Star, on Thursday. As educational institutions across the country have already shut down to slow the spread of the virus and economic activities have slowed to some extent amid people's thinning presence on the streets, this has hit the low-income groups particularly hard. The economic pain for the low-income groups and those working in the informal sector would exacerbate further if the situation worsens. Business and employment would

confront adverse impact if economic activities need to shut down in case of coronavirus outbreak in the country, said the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) yesterday in a briefing. "Workers usually work under temporary contractual arrangement particularly those work in small-scale and informal enterprises would be affected most. Workers who work in labour-intensive formal and export-oriented industries would be adversely affected," the think-tank said. The ADB has recently announced \$6.5 billion initial package to address the immediate needs of its developing member countries as they respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The lender's response to date also includes \$2 million announced on 26 February to support response in all of its developing members. The ADB has a strong track record of responding rapidly to provide targeted support to Bangladesh in times of emergencies, including natural disasters such as floods and cyclones and other disasters like influx of people in Cox's Bazar camps from across the Myanmar border.

**Markets rally on huge economic support plans**

AFP, Hong Kong  
Equities enjoyed some much-needed gains Friday after another volatile week on global markets as investors took solace in a blockbuster series of government and central bank measures aimed at cushioning the economic blow from the coronavirus. The dollar eased somewhat after a lengthy rally fuelled by traders cashing out of their investments, while the embattled oil market extended Thursday's gains. With the deadly pandemic showing no sign of ending, countries are going into lockdown, effectively shutting down the global economy and leaving experts in the dark as to how deep and long an expected recession will last. On Thursday, US Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell presented a \$1 trillion emergency relief package to combat the turmoil, with \$1,200 cash handouts for individuals. It also includes \$208 billion in loans for companies hit by the crisis - \$58 billion of it for the battered airline sector - and \$300 billion in small business loans. The plan is the latest in a series of measures put forward by Washington and comes on top of Federal Reserve interest rate cuts and pledges worth hundreds of billions of dollars to provide liquidity to creating financial markets. It also comes in tandem with similar moves by governments and banks around the world, which have provided some support to investors, but which many observers warn could still be too little as the crisis rumbles on. Hong Kong, Mumbai and Kuala Lumpur all surged more than five percent, Seoul and Mumbai piled on more than seven percent, while Taipei rallied more than six percent. Manila rose 3.4 percent, while Shanghai, Singapore and Jakarta put on more than one percent, with Wellington one percent higher and Sydney up 0.7 percent. Tokyo was closed for a holiday.

**BB roused to action**

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AB Mirza Azizul Islam, a former finance adviser of a caretaker government, echoed the same, while urging the government to do so with a view to keeping the confidence of the private sector afloat. The central bank will have to introduce liquidity support for banks as soon as possible as a good amount of exporters have failed to realise their export proceeds, said Syed Mahabubur Rahman, managing director of Mutual Trust Bank. Banks earlier settled back-to-back letters of credit for exporters in order to help them manufacture the exported goods, he said. They are now unable to get back the fund, which will create a liquidity crisis in the banking sector in the days ahead, said Rahman, also the immediate past chairman of the Association of Bankers, Bangladesh, a forum of managing directors of banks.