



Empty pots are being brought to Sonahara Modhyapara Milk Cooperative Society at Sonahara village in Pabna's Faridpur upazila as the Milk Vita has stopped buying milk from there. *Inset*, a milk collection centre of Pran Dairy at the same village lies closed.

PHOTO: STAR

Corona brings woe for dairy farmers in Pabna, Sirajganj

Big companies curtail milk collection from the major supply zone; stakeholders want govt support for survival

AHMED HUMAYUN KABIR TOPU, back from Baghabari and Faridpur

A large number of dairy farmers in Pabna and Sirajganj are facing a tough time as big milk factories have drastically cut collection of the item from the famous milk producing zone during the ongoing general holidays and countrywide shutdown-like situation aimed at containing the spread of coronavirus.

Md Sakhawat Hossain, a dairy farmer of Sonahara village in Pabna's Faridpur upazila, was shocked as he came to know that state-owned factory Milk Vita has cut half of their usual milk collection target for an uncertain period.

Sakhawat, who has continued supplying milk to Baghabari centre of Milk Vita through a local cooperative for the last few years, has now 15 cows that give 55 to 60 litres of milk daily. He has been supplying only 20 to 25 litters for the last few days.

"Failing to sell the milk to the cooperative I rushed to the owners of local sweet producers but they also refused to buy milk as all the shops got closed due to the threat of coronavirus," said Shakhawat.

He lastly went to a 'ghosh' (chhana producer) and sold the milk for a meagre Tk 15 per litre, that too after repeated request.

"Due to the countrywide shutdown, no one is buying milk from us. What will I do with the huge quantity of milk collected from my cows? I have to spend a good amount of money for buying cattle feed," he said.

Worry of Saidur Rahman of Sonahara village is much more as he usually collects 500 litters of milk from 50 farmers in the village for supplying to Milk Vita at Baghabari through Sonahara Modhyapara Milk Cooperative Society.

"The 50 dairy farmers of Sonahara village are dependent on sale to Milk Vita for their livelihood. Due to the cut in milk collection we are facing serious trouble with the huge amount of milk, which is a perishable item," Saidur said.

Most other big milk companies like Arong, Pran and Akiz have also drastically cut milk collection from the farmers.

They termed the present situation a serious challenge for the dairy industry.

"Usually we used to collect 5000 to 6000 litters of milk every day, but now we are buying only 2500 to 3000 litters," said Mahatab Hossain, manager at Arong's milk collection centre in Faridpur upazila.

"I get 60 litres of milk daily from my 15 cows. Due to the sudden halt of milk collection by the companies, I sold a portion of the milk for Tk 15 per litre and collected cream from another portion. The remaining 20 litres of milk got wasted," said Eusuf Ali, a dairy farmer of Gopalnagar village in the upazila.

Usually a huge quantity of milk is produced in five upazilas of Pabna and Sirajganj and Milk Vita and other milk factories collect over 2 lakh litres, he said.

"Due to the 10 days' leave announced by the government for preventing the spread of Covid-19 disease, the Milk Vita authority has curtailed the milk collection," Amio Kumar Mondol, manager of Baghabari Milk Vita told The Daily Star.

Dairy farmers want subsidy from the government through Milk Vita for survival of the large-scale dairy farming in the region.

"As the factories closed milk collection, our earnings from its sale has stopped. But we have to buy cow feed for high prices," said Md Abul Hossain, a marginal dairy farmer.

"Crop farmers and fishermen get subsidy in times of need. If we get such benefits during this crisis period, it will help to save our dairy firms. We supply milk for the big companies like Milk Vita but they don't take any responsibility during the crisis," he added.

Asked about the matter, Alimun Rajib, general manager of the Milk Vita, however, said, "Now we don't have any plan to give subsidy because this is a temporary crisis. If the crisis stays long then the authority may think about it."

Dr Al Mamun Hossain Mondol, district livestock officer of Pabna, said, "This is really a crisis period for the dairy industry in Pabna and Sirajganj as well the whole country. Farmers should try to preserve milk through alternative ways, such as producing cream. We have informed the higher authorities about the situation."

STONE-CRUSHING WORKERS IN LALMONIRHAT

Silicosis death toll rising

S DILIP ROY, Lalmonirhat

The stone-crushing workers in Patgram upazila are left to suffer as most are too poor to afford treatment for an irreversible lung disease silicosis which is their occupational hazard.

Silicosis is a disease caused by silicon poisoning -- a common side-effect of working in stone-crushing yards. The workers breathe in the silica dust while working in the yards, and the silicon settles in their lungs, slowly solidifying their respiratory systems.

Patgram is dotted with hundreds of stone-crushing yards, where large mountain boulders imported from Bhutan or India are broken down into small chips and fine powder to make products for mosaic, plaster, and building construction.

At least 67 stone-crushing workers died of silicosis in the last six to seven years, said Burimari Union Parishad Chairman Abu Sayed Newaz Nishat, adding he has a list of 100 stone-crushing workers with the disease in the union.

However, the number could be higher as more than 20,000 workers are employed in the stone-crushing industry there, he stated.

There is no official figure for the total number of deaths resulting from silicosis.

When the stone-crushing yards first started operations, impoverished villagers of the border area flocked to sell their labour, but soon realised the job came with fatal side-effects.

Stone-crushing workers affected by this disease have become physically weak and lost their ability to work. With poverty and hunger hanging over the workers' heads, they are left with nothing to do but wait for death.

Fifty-five-year-old Tofazzal Hossain, from Kamarerhat village in Burimari, has been suffering from silicosis for seven years.

He was forced to sell his lone asset -- eight decimals of land -- to meet his treatment costs. After selling his land, he sought shelter on other's land.

"I have been dying of this disease for the past six years," said Tofazzal.

"We used to work as a group of 15 people all of us have been affected by silicosis. Only eight of us are alive now," he said.

Worker Momin Ali had explained to a correspondent of this newspaper last year that the silicosis-affected workers need to take Pulfibro, a life-saving medication for these workers, four times a day. Each pill costs Tk 60.

Today, the workers earn between Tk 360 and Tk 400 a day for their labour.

Pulfibro, the brand name for the drug Pirfenidone, reduces the fibrous tissue formations which fill up the air pockets inside the lungs of the silicosis affected workers. As long as the silicon resides in the lungs of the workers, the lungs will continue to envelope the pollutant with scar tissue, and the workers will have to continue taking this expensive pill to undo the damage.

Momin Ali passed away on February 15 this year at Rangpur Medical College Hospital, as his respiratory system collapsed. He was the coordinator of an unofficial Burimari-based group called the "Silicosis Patient Association", which fought for the rights of the workers.

The workers have been seeking financial assistance for their treatment from the local

administration, public representatives, and wealthy locals. But their pleas remain unheard.

Many have ended up foregoing treatment due to a lack of money; many others have died with no treatment.

"When I receive treatment, I feel a little better. Whenever I stop treatment, I fall sick. But I cannot afford all the medical expenses," said Rashidul Karim, 45, a stone-crushing labourer of Ufarmara village suffering from silicosis.

"By selling off my only asset, one bigha arable land, I sought treatment at the National Institute of Diseases of the Chest and Hospital in Dhaka, as well as hospitals in Rangpur and Lalmonirhat. There is nothing to sell anymore so I cannot afford the medical treatment," he said.

"I have been suffering from this disease for the last five years. Four of my co-workers have gone," he said. With no ability to work, he has to sit at home.

Shaheen Islam, a 42-year-old worker from Dangirpar village, said that he did not know about silicosis when he started work in the stone-crushing yards 14 years ago. Without any precautionary measures in place, all the workers were affected.

"I have been suffering from this disease for eight years. Some of my friends have died of it. My condition is not good either. I'm dying while trapped in my house," he said.

"If I could get treatment, I would probably survive a few more days," he added.

Stone-crushing labourers Rezaul Haque, 38, of Dolapara village; Rahimuddin, 46, of Natarbari village; Altaf Hossain, 48, of Islampur village; Noor Islam, 48, of Bamandal village; Afaz Uddin of Kamarerhat village, and others have also given up due to their financial condition and lack of help.

"Many of us now work while covering our nose and mouth with clothes but most people still don't know to do this," said Nazrul Islam, a 42-year-old labourer in the Burimari land port area.

"We have no alternative work so we crush stones. I know how dangerous and incurable silicosis is, but there is no way out," said another labourer, Safiar Rahman.

Dr Bipul Chandra Roy, a tuberculosis and chest disease specialist at RDRS Bangladesh in Lalmonirhat, said that he is providing treatment to many patients suffering from silicosis. While some receive regular treatment, most are irregular patients as they cannot afford the medicine.

Lalmonirhat Deputy Commissioner Md Abu Jafar told The Daily Star a team from the Ministry of Labour and Employment met with the labourers a month ago. The ministry is preparing to provide financial assistance, he said, but when the help will arrive is a question he does not have an answer to.

"I am contacting the ministry to speed up the steps. And if anyone with the disease appeals to me, I will help," added the deputy commissioner.

Contacted, Patgram Upazila Health and Family Planning Officer (UHFPO) Dr Arup Paul said silicosis affected patients are more vulnerable to the coronavirus infection. They all must stay at home during the ongoing crisis period.

Health officials are collecting information of the silicosis affected people, he added.

Bogura hospital starts treating corona patients

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Bogura

Bogura 250-bed Mohammad Ali Hospital, which was evacuated on March 24 as preparation for treating only patients with symptoms of coronavirus infection, admitted three patients in last two days.

Following a decision by Bogura District Corona Prevention Committee, the hospital authorities on March 24 took initiative to shift 119 admitted patients to other medical facilities and started cleaning and disinfecting the hospital premises to prepare the hospital for only coronavirus patients.

"Of the two patients admitted on Sunday, a 25-year-old youth hails from Khulna district. Two weeks ago, he came to his father's workplace in Bogura's Kahaloo upazila. Then he got fever and started suffering from breathing problem," said Shafique Amin Kajal, resident medical officer (RMO) of the hospital.

"Another male patient from Bogura's Dhunat upazila was admitted at noon. The 1200-bed Shaheed Ziaur Rahman Medical College Hospital in Bogura shifted the 40-year-old man to our hospital as he is suffering from shortness of breath," he said.

A 50-year-old patient with cardiovascular

problem, sent here from Shaheed Ziaur Rahman Medical College Hospital, has been admitted today [Monday], he said.

Necessary equipment including testing kits have been arranged for diagnosis and treatment of patients, officials said.

A 14-member medical team consisting doctors and nurses are providing services at Bogura Mohammad Ali Hospital round the clock and doctors and nurses from different hospitals of Bogura will join the medical team according to the roster, said RMO Shafique.

The authorities have arranged 400 personal protective equipment for the doctors, nurses and others concerned to ensure their safety during performance of their professional work in the crisis period, he added.

According to the police report, 3129 people returned to Bogura from abroad (mostly countries with the coronavirus infection) in March, but only 750 people in the district are in home quarantine now.

"A large number of people who returned from abroad recently did not provide their original addresses, making it difficult to find them. The police are searching for them," said Bogura Civil Surgeon Gausul Azim Chowdhury.

Pregnant woman dies at FMCH

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Faridpur

Allegation of negligence was raised after a two and a half-month pregnant woman died at Faridpur Medical College Hospital (FMCH) yesterday morning.

Relatives of the woman, Ripa Das, 32, an assistant teacher at Ramkol Government Primary School in Pangsha upazila of Rajbari, alleged that she died around 8:30am due to negligence of the hospital's doctors and staffers.

Ripa was wife of Mithun Sarkar, from Ramkol village in Rajbari's Pangsha upazila, and daughter of Anil Kumar Das, from Tapakhola area in Faridpur town.

Ripa's brother-in-law Dheeraj Kumar said after they admitted her to the hospital around 2:00pm on Sunday with excessive bleeding, the doctors there said her baby needed to be aborted.

"Ripa was taken inside the operation theatre around 7:00pm on Sunday. Kaniz Fatema, a gynaecologist, conducted the operation there."

Shortly after Ripa was brought out of the post-operative room around 7:00am yesterday, she

started to have breathing problems. The intern doctors and nurses did not act promptly although her relatives repeatedly requested them to give her oxygen urgently, Dheeraj said.

"They took a long time to bring in an oxygen cylinder. But it was too late -- Ripa had died before she was given the oxygen," he added.

Contacted, FMCH Superintendent Saifur Rahman said, "Kaniz Fatema [the gynaecologist] informed me that the patient was in good condition after the operation. Her condition deteriorated suddenly and she died on Monday morning. I don't know whether the patient died due to a lack of oxygen. If anyone files a written complaint, we will investigate the matter."

Ripa's in-law Dheeraj yesterday said they could not file any complaint with the hospital authorities as they took the body in Pangsha upazila of Rajbari for completing cremation and other funeral proceedings.

Ripa's family would file a formal complaint with the FMCH authorities after all the funeral formalities are over, he also said.

The Koras of the War

Embroided in battle with poverty, two aging war veterans yet to receive proper state recognition

KONGKON KARMAKER with FIROZ A MUZAHID

"I've got to do something for my country -- that's all I could think of. I have to free my country from Pakistan," Kina Kora reminisced about how he felt when the Pakistani occupation army cracked down on unarmed Bangladeshis in the dark night of March 25 in 1971.

Now 68, Kina Kora can still vividly recollect those turbulent days of '71 when he was only nineteen years of age.

Some time around the end of March or early April that year, Kina and three others left their village to join the war -- the war to liberate their motherland.

One of the three was his 21-year-old brother Sattan Kora. The other two, Thopal and Gopal Kora, also 19 and 21 at the time, were also siblings.

These four courageous youths belong to the Koras -- a timid but hardworking small ethnic community on the verge of extinction. Only 21 Kora families still live in the remote village of Haljay, in Dinajpur's Biral upazila. Before Bangladesh won independence in '71, there were around 200 Kora families in Haljay, now known as Korapara.

With sparkle in his eyes, Kina continued the story. "We were young and brave" and driven by Bangabandhu's fiery speech of 7th March.

After leaving the village, on their way to receive training on guerrilla warfare in West Bengal of India, they somehow got separated. Sattan ended up in Siliguri's Panighatta, where he received his training. The other three got their training in Hamzapur, near the western border of Dinajpur.

Kina said, "After the training at Hamzapur, I was stationed in Ghugudanga village of Dinajpur Sadar upazila, where the Pakistanis had a stronghold."

"A fierce battle ensued between the Pakistanis and us. We lost our comrade Alim Uddin there. Later, we engaged in heavy fighting with the Pakistanis in

Jamalpur and Ramsagar areas of Sadar upazila."

But around September, before the struggle for freedom of his motherland ended, Kina had to return home to stand by his family's struggle for survival.

"My family was in a dire situation when I came home," Kina said, adding that his family and the villagers were suffering from a near-famine situation.

Out of his three compatriots, Gopal, son of Papua Kora, died in 1973 and Gopal's brother Thopal is now incapable of talking perceptibly due to paralysis,

Confirming that Sattan had sustained injuries during the war, Saleq said he could not interview Kina due to time constraint at the time.

Asked whether he or the other Koras, who fought in Bangladesh's War of Independence, ever received any formal recognition as freedom fighters, Kina said the four Kora fighters were given some sort of documentation by the then government after independence of the country.

"We were given some papers then. But, that got washed away during the



PHOTO: KONGKON KARMAKER

Thopal Kora, left, is now incapable of talking perceptibly due to paralysis. Kina Kora, right, took arms training with Thopal and Gopal Kora at Hamzapur in India.

said Kina, who still makes a living by working as an agricultural day labourer.

His brother Sattan, who passed away in India in 2018, was wounded during the war, he said, adding that Sattan had moved to the country in 1987 following a land dispute with villagers.

Saleq Khokon, a Dhaka-based writer and researcher of small ethnic communities, said about 13 years ago, when Sattan Kora was visiting his village home, Saleq had the opportunity to interview Sattan and Thopal -- two among the four Koras who had fought in the Liberation War of 1971.

devastating flood of 1987," he said helplessly.

Ever since he returned home from the war 49 years ago, he and the other members of his community have been struggling to stave off hunger and poverty, Kina said. "Thopal's and my family still live from hand to mouth."

Even though they fought for the country's independence without expecting any return, said the Kora fighter, adding that formal recognition as freedom fighters during their lifetime would offer some solace amid financial hardship and illness.