

TAMING CORONAVIRUS RAMPAGE

CHT fruit growers given short end of the stick

JAGARAN CHAKMA

If you have had a pineapple recently, there's a pretty good chance it came from the Chittagong Hill Tracts. That's because the three districts account for some 60 per cent of the juicy fruit consumed in the country.

The same goes for bananas. A wide array of seasonal fruits including papaya, mango, jackfruit, litchi and watermelon have been the choice for mass-scale cultivation in Rangamati, Bandarban and Khagrachhari for the past decade.

And, thanks to the use of organic fertilisers, there is now a consensus that the fruits from the region have an amplified taste.

The harvest of pineapple and watermelon have already started while in the coming months plucking would start for mango, jackfruit and litchi. April, May and June are the busiest of times for harvests and sales.

The Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE) expects farmers to maintain bumper productions as in previous years for the presence of favourable weather.

With their main markets being ever-growing cities like Dhaka, Chattogram, Sylhet and Narayanganj, there was supposed to be no issues of farmers unable to get just prices.

Yet that is exactly what is happening, now exacerbated by the global coronavirus pandemic.

That is because, when it comes to the trade of the fruits there is still a reliance on an old practice of middlemen.

These traders go out to the cultivators some time before harvests and settle on a price with the farmers for all of their produce. They take the produce to the cities to sell off to smaller traders.

This practice limits offers available to farmers while urbanites continue to dole out high prices, meaning a substantial chunk of the value of the fruits is being pocketed somewhere along the way.

Take the case of Ananta Chakma.

Though he had a good harvest cultivating pineapples on around five acres of land in Chowdhurychhara village under Naniarchar upazila of Rangamati, he believes he would just be able to recover his production cost.

He said the middlemen always offer rock bottom prices citing low demand and now



Pineapple growers in the Chittagong Hill Tracts are not getting fair prices due to a thin presence of customers in the local markets. The photo was taken recently from Banarupa Samata Ghat in Rangamati. ANVIL CHAKMA

were blaming the countrywide shutdown centring the novel coronavirus pandemic.

He expects to make sales of about Tk 5 lakh this year.

"I could have earned at least Tk 6 lakh to Tk 7 lakh," Chakma said.

Another good example came from Basanti Talukder who cultivated bananas on 2.5 acres land in Perachhara village.

The joy of a bumper harvest has been dampened by a lack of buyers. She is even unsure of whether she would be able to sell the bulk of her produce.

Talukder said this time around there were even not enough hands available to get the bananas to the market as people were avoiding social contact to prevent the spread of the virus.

The Daily Star got in touch with one of

the middlemen who preferred not to be named.

He said truck rental costs had gone up by Tk 10,000 while police were extorting traders at loading points.

Accurate and comprehensive data on harvests are hard to come by for all three districts.

The DEA expects more than 2 lakh tonnes of mango to come from the three districts while another 2.5 lakh tonnes of jackfruit, 75,000 tonnes of litchi and 10 lakh tonnes of bananas.

More than 60,000 tonnes of pineapples and at least 1,000 tonnes of watermelon have been produced in Rangamati this year. In Khagrachhari, at least 25,000 tonnes of pineapples have been cultivated.

That farmers are not getting just prices from middlemen has been acknowledged

by Paban Chakma, deputy director of the DAE in Rangamati.

The DAE was providing support though police and the civil administration so that businesspeople could take their consignments to Dhaka and Chattogram smoothly.

According to Md Martuz Ali, deputy director of the DEA in Khagrachhari, the supply chain management was still properly functioning as the local administration was providing support as per directives of Prime Minister's Office.

"We are providing support directly to farmers to ensure good harvests and prices," he said.

However, he admitted that farmers in some cases might not be getting prices they had been expecting for the shutdown.

Inmates can get funds through bKash, Nagad

MUHAMMAD ZAHIDUL ISLAM

Prisoners will now receive funds from their friends and family members through mobile financial service providers Nagad and bKash following a government move aimed at facilitating money transfer amid the countrywide lockdown.

"Since family members can't visit inmates during the crisis, we decided on this move," AKM Mostafa Kamal Pasha, inspector general of prisons, told The Daily Star over the phone.

There are 68 prisons across the country, where about 87,000 detainees currently reside.

Due to the ongoing lockdown aimed at curbing the spread of the novel coronavirus, visitation rights for inmates have been temporarily halted.

The Prisoner's Cash fund, which receives money in cash, has historically been used by detainees to pay for various services while imprisoned. This includes making phone calls and buying foods at canteens.

Although there are other viable channels, the government decided to restrict the transfer of funds to prisoners to the two services as a wider range of options would create chaos.

Nagad was chosen as it is a government initiative while bKash has been selected considering its wide presence. bKash boasts more than four crore accounts and Nagad about two crore.

The government directive, however, outlined a few conditions for the transfer of funds to prisoners.

Inmates will not be permitted to receive more than Tk 2,000 per month and the money even can't be sent in one go. This means friends or family members can only transfer a maximum Tk 1,000 at any given time within a month.

The senders will bear the cash-out charges.

After funds are transferred, the sender will have to inform the prison authorities about the transaction via a text message detailing the receiver's name, his or her father's name and home address.

The specified amount will be deposited in the Prisoner's Cash book for later use.

The home ministry also clarified how many accounts can be opened by the authorities in a prison.

If the number of detainees is within 500, one merchant account with each of the two MFS providers can be opened.

If the number of prisoners is between 501 and 1,000, two accounts can be allowed to open. Three accounts can be opened when the number ranges between 1,001 and 3,000.

If there are more than 3,000 prisoners, the authorities can open five accounts with each MFS provider.

"This is a digitalisation move that will ensure more facilities at prisons as well as for the authorities," said Tanvir Ahmed Mishuk, managing director of Nagad.

Officials from Nagad earlier urged the government to implement more MFS services considering the coronavirus pandemic.

On March 24, Nagad introduced a new service for inmates to connect with their loved ones through telephones.

"These services certainly ensure better facilities for prisoners and we will look into how they can be implemented," Pasha said.

MFS SEES GREATER USE AMONG EXPATS
Compared with the first three months of the year, there was a 150 per cent rise in April in the number of Bangladeshi expatriates using online money transfer services, according to a press release from bKash.

Since the start of January until April 18, Bangladeshi expatriates sent home about Tk 138 crore in remittance through bKash and this value is increasing daily, the MFS provider said.

The bulk of the amount came from Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, the Middle East, Europe and the UK.



The development priorities now changed all on a sudden



RUSHIDAN ISLAM RAHMAN

To contain the spread of the lethal coronavirus, the government has put in place some inevitable measures like social distancing and countrywide shutdown though these may result in a downturn in economic growth.

In Bangladesh, there is no choice between saving lives and livelihoods. If these steps are not taken, the virus will spread so fast that the production activities will be disrupted.

But the most disastrous effect of lockdown is that it means loss of livelihoods of the poorest groups who face the threat of food deficit and hunger.

The government and the non-governmental organisations are taking measures to ensure the availability of food among these groups, but there is a need for vigilance around the implementation process.

The following discussion focuses on issues that are relevant not only at this moment but in the coming year or even longer.

These issues include concerns about GDP growth, how to maintain livelihoods of the poor and their employment and also the need to recognise that there are other groups for whom employment is needed.

Estimates of low GDP growth this fiscal year are coming from various quarters but the usual questions about the reasons for the downturn in the economic growth may not be relevant.

Since the growth in the first three quarters was as expected, the decline in GDP growth is obviously due to coronavirus and cannot be attributed to specific policies of the recent past.

Therefore, a debate on the extent of deceleration may not be the most urgent policy question. A comparison of growth figures among the Asian neighbours is also not as useful as has been in the past.

At this moment, a comparison must combine the growth deceleration figures with the damage done by coronavirus in terms of the share of the population infected and share of deaths.

If Bangladesh is successful in containing the infections and eliminating the other sufferings, especially food shortage and hunger, then the low GDP growth may not be a discredit.

Rather an attempt to reverse the growth

But during the next one year, the rice exporting countries will be cautious about export, and given the current uncertainty, every country will try to minimise risks related to food availability.

Bangladesh must also try to maintain food supply, especially food grain production. It is heartening that instruction has come from the top leadership to increase food production and to use all land to grow more food.



The countrywide shutdown since March 26 to flatten the spread on coronavirus has left the poor and the vulnerable, like the little girl pictured above, battling hunger. The photo was taken on Monday at the capital's Kamalapur area. ANISUR RAHMAN

scenario at the cost of faster spread of the virus and resulting deaths may not be acceptable. Of course, one needs to consider pragmatic steps to accelerate growth as and when the curve flattens.

Ensuring food security requires attention to issues beyond immediate actions to mitigate hunger. Access to adequate food by all walks of people will require adequate availability in the coming months or year at the aggregate level.

Bangladesh has been almost self-reliant in food for the last few years. In years of good harvest, the share of imported rice declines and the reverse in case of any abnormal decline in production.

Now proper implementation and monitoring are needed as accelerated agricultural growth can contribute to higher GDP growth over the next two years.

Although the upcoming boro harvest is expected to be normal, special arrangements must be made to ensure that labour is available for the harvest and post-harvest activities. Sufficient aman acreage has to be ensured as well.

If coronavirus spreads, agricultural production may continue uninterrupted, even amid social distancing.

The loss of livelihoods of the poorest is only a part of the total loss of employment and related sufferings. Many of those

who are above that level have lost their temporary jobs.

In industrial and services sectors, a bigger share of jobs is of informal and temporary nature. A large share of them have possibly lost jobs and many others will not receive salaries for the days not worked due to the shutdown.

The other categories suffering from a lack of employment are those who have entered the labour market in 2020.

Before they have secured a job, the doors of the job market have been closed and those who completed education in 2019 now have no prospect of a job. Many would have taken up overseas jobs but that route too is closed.

Whenever the economy returns to normalcy, employment creation for these groups will be a priority. While making plans for job creation, the government cannot work with past experience.

During the last decade or so, the total entrants to new labour force were in the range of 1.8 to 2 million per year of which 0.4 to 1.0 million availed overseas employment each year.

Therefore, the balance was the net addition to the domestic labour force. When the economy is back to the normal track, the net domestic labour force seeking employment will be the entire addition in a year, which is about 1.9 million-plus a backlog of new entrants of 2020.

Not the entire supply can be absorbed in a year, but definite guidelines and strategies must be adopted during those years.

Low-income households faced with a shortage of food and essentials may reduce their expenditure on education. Aggressive skill training plans for various groups may supplement the general education to take care of this problem.

The other important change to be initiated is a better healthcare system, both in terms of quality and regional dispersion within the country.

When the deadly virus will be ultimately defeated, the experience of this period is expected to open up new opportunities and the nation must be prepared to utilise these opportunities.

The writer is the executive chairperson of the Centre for Development and Employment Research

NBR bids for faster port clearance

SOHEL PARVEZ

The revenue board yesterday directed its customs stations to facilitate clearance of all export and import consignments, moving away from its previous position to process documents for only essentials, industrial raw materials and emergency medical products.

The move comes to alleviate the acute contained congestion at the Chattogram port, leaving incoming vessels to wait for days on end to get a berth.

As of yesterday, import containers lying at the port reached 49,974 twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs), against the capacity of 49,018 TEUs.

This means those who import goods for commercial purposes will be also able to clear their goods, said a senior official of the National Board of Revenue (NBR).

Since the beginning of the countrywide shutdown, the NBR included more imported products in its list to facilitate the clearance from the ports and ensure a smooth supply chain of goods in the country.

It initially asked field offices of customs at ports to keep services running at a limited capacity to facilitate the clearance of essential commodities and shipment of export items.

Later, the NBR included industrial raw materials, capital machinery and parts, agricultural equipment and components, ingredients of poultry and fish feeds and the goods imported under diplomatic privilege and brought into the country by the public, semi-government and autonomous organisations in the list of items for duty assessment and clearance.

In its order yesterday, the NBR asked all customs stations to keep normal office activities open.

It, however, suggested customs officials take protective measures as per guidelines of health directorate and ensure social distance.