

Amusement parks desperate to welcome visitors again

Complexes continue to haemorrhage money during indefinite closure

MAHMUDUL HASAN

With amusement parks across the world slowly starting to reopen while keeping social distancing guidelines and other restriction in place to prevent mass coronavirus infections, it remains unknown when similar establishments in Bangladesh will resume operations.

The owners of amusement parks in the country have struggled for the last three-and-a-half-months to bear the exorbitant maintenance expenses, pay salaries and instalments on bank loans as income dropped to zero when the government recently enforced nationwide shutdown in March in a bid to curb the spread of coronavirus.

While the authorities have allowed small-scale stores and shopping centres to reopen in May and transport services to ply from June 1, the amusement parks have yet to receive the greenlight.

Hotels, restaurants, shopping malls, transport and airlines have been reopened, said Anup Kumar Sarkar, executive director of the Concord Group of Companies, whose concern Concord Entertainment, operates Fantasy Kingdom and Foy's Lake.

Concord owns Fantasy while Foy's lake, which is owned by Bangladesh Railway, was leased on a 50-year contract.

"Why do we have to still keep the amusement parks out of operation? Although the tourism industry and amusement parks have suffered irreparable damage, so far, no specific direction has been found when it comes to opening the parks," he said.

Established in 2001, Fantasy Kingdom, located in Ashulia, provides a range of fun activities, including a separate water park named Water Kingdom and private retreats at Motel Atlantis.

More than 300 people are employed by the park.

"We haven't laid off any workers so far. But if we cannot reopen, we will have no other option," Sarkar said.

The park, which hosted more than 2,000 visitors daily on average in the past, has been losing an estimated Tk 10 lakh each day from the lack of ticket and food sales since the



Fantasy Kingdom in Ashulia looks eerily quiet and deserted amid the coronavirus pandemic as amusement parks in Bangladesh haven't been allowed to reopen yet. The photos were taken last week.



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shutdown began on March 26. Located at the heart of Chattogram, the Foy's Lake complex in Pahartoli has an area of 336 acres, complete with an amusement park and water park with a picturesque view surrounded by hills, a lake and forests. It also has a resort of 38 rooms and 11 bungalows.

About 1,000 people visit the famous lake each day.

"If you do not switch on these machines and rides, these get damaged," Sarkar said, adding that they still have to pay the electric bills and other overheads.

Tourism and amusement destinations under the Bangladesh Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions (BAAPA) have already developed Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) to reopen the parks.

Under the guidelines, authorities will allow only healthy people to enter their facilities and encourage the use of masks or face coverings for guests and staff, provide a means to wash or sanitise hands frequently and manage crowd density to keep people 3 feet apart from each other.

The parks are also planning to reduce touch

areas where possible and frequently sanitise high-touch surfaces like railings, protect employees with various approaches, including barriers, protective coverings and distancing and proper treatment facilities on site.

"We are ready with all safety measures. If the authorities advise us against particular rides for risk of infection, we will not open those rides," said Tushar Bin Yousuf, chief executive officer of Nandan Park.

Launched in 2013, the popular park has been closed since March 20 and currently employs about 250 people.

On a normal day before the coronavirus outbreak, the park hosts upwards of 2,000 visitors with an average invoice value of more than Tk 500 per person.

The main income of the amusement parks comes from visitors during the two Eid festivities, according to Yousuf.

"We have already lost one Eid. If we cannot host visitors for the upcoming Eid, we will be devastated," he added.

For five days around Eid, about 25,000 people visit the park.

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Govt to establish technical education institute in Ctg

JAGARAN CHAKMA

As part of the government's initiative to expand Bangladesh's technical education sector, a general engineering technology centre will be set up at the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Shilpa Nagar (BSMSN) in Chattogram.

Once complete, the institute is expected to produce skilled manpower for industrial units located at the economic zone and subsequently save billions of dollars lost through outward remittance each year, said Paban Chowdhury, executive chairman of Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority (Beza).

Beza in cooperation with the commerce ministry will build the institute on a 10-acre plot under the Export Competitiveness for Jobs Project financed by the World Bank.

The institute is expected to produce skilled manpower for industrial units at the economic zone and save outward remittances spent as wages for foreign professionals each year

Students enrolled at the institute will have access to sophisticated technology, be taught with up-to-date curriculums and have skills and management training courses.

"After graduation, they will be absorbed by different industries," he added.

Bangladeshi entrepreneurs spend around \$6 billion annually to hire foreign experts, particularly from India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, to help operate their businesses, according to various sources.

However, if skilled manpower was readily available, local entrepreneurs would not need to hire workers from abroad, said Chowdhury.

According to the Beza official, the development of similar educational facilities could attract investment since there is always demand for skilled workers.

If the institute produces efficient technicians, companies might also be able to manufacture high quality products for export.

Therefore, the general engineering technology centre will be a model for other technical education institutes in the country, he said.

The project has an estimated cost of \$119.12 million, of which the World Bank will fund up to \$100 million while the government the rest, according to Beza.

Although the project is being conducted under the commerce ministry, Beza is taking all kinds of initiatives to set up the institute, Chowdhury added.

Beza expects construction to be complete within the next two years.

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Pandemic leaves plastic goods exporters in a bind

JAGARAN CHAKMA

Shipments of plastic products from Bangladesh fell 16 per cent year-on-year to \$101 million in fiscal year 2019-20 following the outbreak of coronavirus all over the world.

Over 142 plastic items are currently manufactured in Bangladesh and the country mainly exports intermediate products like film plastic, household items and garment accessories to the US, Canada, the EU, China, India and Nepal.

Manufacturers achieved 22 per cent year-on-year growth in exports to hit \$120 million in fiscal 2018-19. They even set a target to send goods worth about \$150 million abroad in the next year.

But exports fell when buyers, especially from Germany and Italy, drastically reduced their orders in the last quarter of previous fiscal year due to the ongoing pandemic, said Md Jashim Uddin, president of the Bangladesh Plastic Goods Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BPGMEA).

Germany and Italy are still two of the hardest hit European countries by Covid-19. As of July 14, Germany has 198,963 confirmed coronavirus cases and the number is even higher for Italy -- 243,230.

German buyers used to place orders with Chinese manufacturers, but they started



sourcing from Bangladesh to avail cheaper, quality products, he said earlier.

New buyers started to come from Europe, particularly Germany-based supermarkets, which source household plastic products from Bangladesh, aiding in the rise of exports in fiscal 2018-19.

The orders fell as European countries went for the wholesale

closure of shops and supermarkets to stop the spread of the deadly pathogen, he added.

In fiscal 2017-18, exports had seen a 16 per cent year-on-year drop when China stopped importing PET (polyethylene terephthalate) bottle scraps, according to the Export Promotion Bureau.

Bangladesh has only a 0.6 per cent share of the global plastic

market worth \$546 billion and the BPGMEA aims to occupy 3 per cent of the global market by 2030.

The south Asian nation produces several types of extrusion material, moulding, thermosetting conversion like manufacturing of PVC pipes, shopping bags, injection moulding products, garment bags, woven bags, PET/PE bottle, laminated packages, making of

profile, rigid sheets, garment accessories, household products, cosmetics, medicine packs etc.

The government is providing 10 per cent cash incentive to exporters. As of now, total investment in Bangladesh's 12th highest export earning sector is around Tk 21,000 crore.

The plastic makers have created at least 12 lakh jobs in a total of 5,030 small, medium and big factories across the country.

Some 175,500 people are doing job in small units, 444,000 in 1,480 medium units and 10,000 in big units.

Currently, there are around 100 plastic product manufacturers, who also aid export earnings of almost \$800 million per year through direct and indirect backward linkage supplies to different sectors, especially the apparel sector, Jashim Uddin noted.

The plastic sector was quite dependent on raw material imports, for which global competitiveness had an influence on their business, he said.

The main raw material for producing plastic goods is polyolefin, which is derived during the refining of crude oil and cracking or distillation of natural gas liquids.

Despite having no polyolefin manufacturing facility, Bangladeshi businesses expected the plastic sector to post 25 per cent growth every year.

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Social Islami Bank launches 'dual prepaid' card

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Social Islami Bank has launched a "dual prepaid" card with a number of features which would make daily activities of its users "more comfortable than ever".

The card can be used both at home and abroad for multiple purposes, including transactions at automatic teller machines, point of sale terminals and e-commerce, said the bank in a press release yesterday.

Students can use this card to pay tuition

fees across the world including registration fees of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

Freelancers can make payments for license or registration fees of different online platforms like Google, Windows and Blackberry.

Payments can also be made for online training, vendor certification programmes, website domain registration and hosting and cloud solution.

