

Payment for video conferencing platforms can now be made with international, virtual cards

MAHMUDUL HASAN

Holding court over video conferencing platforms have become an inextricable part of the daily life of corporate and government officials in these pandemic times. But the services rendered by the platforms are not free and sending payment for them to outside of Bangladesh was rather tricky.

Now, the Bangladesh Bank has come forward to bring ease in payments for these online services.

Payments for such services can now be made using international cards and virtual cards, according to a notice issued by the central bank yesterday.

"In case of requirement for online payments against such services, authorised dealers (ADs) may issue virtual card or onetime card in the name of the nominated official of the applicant entities," it read.

Virtual cards are a digital alternative to plastic cards and the best solution for online payments.

Previously, documents had to be submitted and there was a waiting period for payments to get the approval to make it through the SWIFT Gateway.

However, some banks have been allowing their customers to execute such payments under the central bank's foreign exchange guidelines. The new notice brought further clarity.

Video conferencing services have witnessed a robust boom in the country as huge numbers of people have started working from their homes since late March.

Platforms in use in Bangladesh include Zoom, Cisco Webex, BlueJeans and Microsoft Teams.

The number of customers of videoconferencing company Zoom has surged during the pandemic



and its stocks witnessed an increase of more than 150 per cent since late February.

In one private bank in Bangladesh, payments for Zoom has ballooned 500 per cent since March.

"Bangladesh Bank's clarification will benefit

both the bank and the customers. Payment requests for other video conferencing platforms besides Zoom have also increased by several hundred per cent in the last five months," said the bank's head of card division wishing anonymity.

Tea production to be ramped up by 2025

REFAYET ULLAH MIRDHA

The government is targeting to increase tea production by about 46 per cent to 140 million kilograms by 2025 in a bid to meet the growing domestic demand for the beverage, said Commerce Minister Tipu Munshi.

After Bangladesh gained independence back in 1971, tea became one of the country's top export items alongside jute and leather.

However, what was once considered a symbol of aristocracy is now a popular household staple as domestic consumption increased significantly over the years.

As incomes rose, so too did the demand for tea at local markets. For instance, tea was traditionally reserved for members of the upper middle-class, but now, the beverage is consumed in all corners of the country.

In an effort to meet the rising trend of domestic demand, local producers reduced their exports while in some cases, high-end tea was imported from countries like Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan.

Currently, there are 167 tea plantations on 2.8 lakh acres of land across Bangladesh. In 2019, the local demand for tea stood at 95.2 million kilograms, according to a statement from the commerce ministry.

The sector provides about 96,000

and a few other countries in the Middle East after meeting local demand.

Although both production and revenue in the sector have grown manifold, securing the rights of tea plantation workers remains an elusive task as most of them are still deprived of proper healthcare or education, according to Pankaj Kondo, vice-president of the Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union.

The plight of workers at tea estates was either unheard or ignored for many years while the ongoing coronavirus pandemic has only deepened their crisis.

To address the issue, a tripartite committee was formed 19 months ago with an aim to set a minimum daily wage scale for plantation workers.

However, the committee has had to put negotiations on hold amid the coronavirus outbreak, Kondo said, adding that the wage scale is usually revised every two years.

"We also want tea production to increase in line with the demand for this product. But at the same time, our demands should also be heard so that we can survive the ongoing crisis," he said.

Various union leaders had previously placed a charter 107 demand before the wage board, asking it to set a minimum daily wage for tea workers.

"We are scheduled to hold another meeting in this regard next week. We have demanded Tk 260 be set as the new daily

24pc women online entrepreneurs go out of business as pandemic bites

Finds BIGD study

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

As many as 24 per cent of the women online entrepreneurs were compelled to close their businesses in June as their desperate efforts to stay afloat since the pandemic went in vain, a new study found.

Of the women entrepreneurs who tried hard to reduce the loss in revenue by cancelling orders and selling off stocks in April, a quarter closed their businesses finally in June, said the study by the Brac Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) under the Brac University.

Mehnaz Rabbani, programme lead for research, policy, and governance at the BIGD, presented the findings of the study titled "Knocked Down, but Up Again: The Case of Female Online Entrepreneurs in Bangladesh" at a webinar yesterday.

The study selected small online businesses owned by women mostly in the informal sector. In the first round, 122 such entrepreneurs were interviewed through online questionnaires from 14 April to 21 April. In the second round, 103 of them were interviewed over the phone from 31 May to 11 June.

Though online sales of health products and daily essentials flourished because of the pandemic, the crisis took a heavy toll on online retailers of fashion, cosmetics and other imported products.

According to the study, 27 per cent had resumed operation after the temporary closure at the beginning of the pandemic. Nearly half of the respondents said they had been able to continue their businesses despite the crisis.

Those who closed businesses, 16 per cent were homemakers, meaning they had to shut their ventures due to the burden of unpaid care work at home.

THE GOING GOT TOUGH FOR FEMALE E-COMMERCE ENTREPRENEURS

SOURCE: BIGD

- 27%** resumed operation after lockdown eased
- 49%** continued operation despite pandemic
- 79%** reported lower sales
- 68%** used personal savings
- 19%** rely on family and friends
- 65%** sellers have no formal registration
- 63%** are unaware of where to seek government assistance.

Of the entrepreneurs who are still running businesses, they had to spend an average 7.5 hours on unpaid care and household chores every day, way higher than 5.4 hours before the pandemic hit, the study showed.

After the lockdown was eased in June, they could manage to dedicate 3.3 hours to their businesses, down from 5.5 hours previously.

As many as 79 per cent of the respondents reported lower sales compared with the pre-crisis level. In the first round, 84 per cent said

they made lower sales compared with that during Baishakh last year.

In the first round, the respondents predicted that 122 employees would be laid off out of their total of 668. In the second round, they said 121 employees were laid off within one month.

The entrepreneurs say if demand does not pick up and business operations don't resume, another 547 staff will have to be let go in the next three months.

The report showed 68 per cent of the businesses were operating with money coming from personal savings while 19 per cent were relying on family and friends for support.

As many as 65 per cent of the sellers have no formal registration or trade licence and none of them is receiving any assistance from the government or non-government organisations.

In June, 63 per cent of the respondents were found to be unaware of where to seek government assistance.

Speaking at the webinar, Selima Ahmad, a lawmaker and president of the Bangladesh Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry, stressed on the importance of trade licence to expand the business of online entrepreneurs, as it becomes difficult to lobby for them in absence of registration.

"There is no noticeable mention of women entrepreneurs in the Bangladesh Bank's circulars on stimulus packages related to COVID-19 although women entrepreneurs continue to play an essential role in contributing to the economy of Bangladesh," she added.

Maheen Sultan, a senior fellow for practice at the BIGD, moderated the event. Nasheeba Selim, a senior social development officer for gender at the Asian Development Bank Resident Mission in Bangladesh and Imran Matin, executive director of the BIGD, also spoke.



SHEIKH NASIR

opportunities for direct employment but if indirect employment is considered as well, the number could reach 1.5 lakh.

Munshi met with the owners of various tea plantations at his residence in Dhaka yesterday.

During his discussion with tea plantation owners, Munshi said that the government has taken several steps to increase domestic production and export, such as introducing new varieties.

In the past, Bangladesh used to ship massive amounts of tea to the US, Pakistan

wage for workers as opposed to the Tk 102 per day they receive now," Kondo told The Daily Star over the phone.

Union leaders are hopeful of a positive response from plantation owners as the coronavirus fallout has taken quite a toll on the tea businesses.

Also, the government and tea plantation owners should take necessary measures to improve the living standards of their workers, meaning that the health and education-related issues should be properly addressed, he said.

Container ship lists at Ctg port

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

A cargo ship's departure from the Chattogram port was suspended yesterday after it was found to be listing to the starboard side.

Sailing the Panama-flagged OEL Hind will be risky for the stability issue, said Secretary to Chattogram Port Authority (CPA) Md Omar Faruk.

Berth operators at jetty number 11 completed loading the vessel around 3:00am and discovered its precarious position in the morning. They later started removing some of the containers to reach equilibrium, said sources.

The 186-metre long ship had 1,268 TEUs (twenty feet equivalent units) of exports-laden and empty containers and it has the capacity to carry more, said Muntasir Rubayat, head of operations of the vessel's local agent GBX Logistics.

The load on the ship might be unevenly distributed, he presumed.

A total of eight containers were removed by afternoon with no effect. The shore crane could not reach containers on the sea side so the ship might have to be shifted to another jetty with a bigger quayside gantry crane, the official said.

Senior officials of the CPA including its deputy conservator, harbour master and the ship's agents held a meeting in the evening to find the cause and a solution.

The ship had arrived from Colombo on 20 August and is destined for Singapore.



One of six shops founded under a state-run Beggar Rehabilitation Programme being inaugurated in Brahmanbaria's Ashuganj upazila on Friday. Six local beneficiaries formerly engaged in seeking alms have been provided sheds next to the upazila health complex alongside Tk 50,000-worth goods, including fish and fruits, to make a living anew as shopkeepers.

MASUK HRIDYO