

Facebook assures govt of complying with local tax laws: Jabbar

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Facebook, the world's largest social media platform with around 2.4 billion users, has assured the government that it will comply with Bangladesh's tax and value added tax (VAT) laws while operating in the country. A team of officials representing Facebook pledged to conduct monthly meetings with the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) and other vested quarters to ensure transparency in their activities, according to Post and Telecom Minister Mustafa Jabbar.

Bangladesh as part of its ongoing efforts to reduce the spread of misinformation and improve the quality of news people find on its platform. The minister also emphasised on the need to appoint representative in Bangladesh, which could help Facebook pay taxes to the National Board of Revenue (NBR) and during proper translation and application of Bangla language in the social media platform. Recalling the laws of Bangladesh, its traditional culture, values and norms, the minister said there are laws in the country



The team also said they would take regulatory issues seriously as per the Digital Security Act 2018, Tax and VAT Act. Jabbar informed the media of this development following a virtual meeting with Facebook's regional headquarters in Singapore yesterday. During the meeting, the minister urged Facebook to avoid disseminating Bangladesh's sensitive information on terrorism, sectarianism, sedition, pornography and anti-socio-cultural values from either home or abroad. He also asked the social media giant to ensure that personal, social or state data is secured as per the country's laws. "It is Facebook's responsibility to comply with all the relevant laws and regulations of Bangladesh, including the Digital Security Act," Jabbar said. "Our country and our society must give our citizens the opportunity to use Facebook safely," he added. In April, Facebook launched its third-party fact-checking programme in

that even Facebook will have to adhere to. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's firm commitment to protect the country's citizens prevailed during the three-hour meeting, he added. The Facebook officials also informed that a Bangladeshi has been appointed to look after these issues to ensure the quick resolution of any existing problems regarding content. Earlier, the minister held meetings with senior Facebook officials on September 23, 2019 in Dhaka and February 2017 in Barcelona, Spain on the sidelines of the World Mobile Congress. The minister maintained regular contact with various Facebook officials since 2018 and met with the company's representatives on many occasions. Mustafa Kamal, director general of the BTRC; Alamgir Hossain, member (tax policy) at the NBR; Vikram Sen, head of safety at Facebook, and Ashwini Rana, director of public policy, were, among others, present at the event.

Onion OMS soon to tame prices

Trading came to a brief halt at Chattogram's Khatunganj after mobile court drives

REFAYET ULLAH MIRDHA and DWAIPIYAN BARUA

The commerce ministry has once again decided to go for open market sales (OMS) of onion in Dhaka to tame the kitchen staple's spiralling prices.

The decision was taken at a taskforce meeting, headed by Commerce Secretary Md Jafar Uddin, after onion trading came to a halt at Chattogram's Khatunganj after two mobile court drives in the wholesale hub.

The state-owned Trading Corporation of Bangladesh will soon start selling onions and continue until the next harvest season in the coming winter, the commerce ministry said in a statement on Sunday.

However, it did not mention when exactly said sales will begin.

The taskforce did not find any reason behind the sudden price hike of onion as, according to market data, local markets have a smooth supply and an adequate stock of the vegetable.

A section of unscrupulous traders may have purposely increased its prices to make brisk business at expense of their customers, which is a punishable crime, the statement said.

So, the government has decided to take tough action against people who might be found to be involved in the creation of an artificial crisis and unlawful stockpiling of onion.

Profiteering through the stockpiling or hoarding of essential commodities is punishable by law and so, the government has strengthened market monitoring in order to nab the culprits, the ministry added.

The taskforce also decided to request the National Board of Revenue to reschedule the tariffs on onion imports to ensure an increased supply of the kitchen staple.

This week, local onion prices hovered between Tk 60 and Tk 65 per kilogram while imported ones were sold at Tk 55-60 per kilogram. However, onions were sold at Tk



Owners of the around 70 wholesale shops for onion, ginger, turmeric and garlic in Chattogram's Khatunganj stage a protest blocking adjoining roads and keeping their outlets shut yesterday over fines slapped by the district administration.

RAJIB RAIHAN

25-35 per kilogram just a month ago in different kitchen markets in Dhaka.

Last year, prices rose abnormally to Tk 250 per kilogram due to a supply-chain disruption from India, a major source of onion for Bangladesh. The government had to import onions by air to tame the price spiral.

Yesterday, the Chattogram district administration conducted mobile court drives at various kitchen markets and fined seven stores Tk 14,000 for the illogical price hike.

On Sunday, magistrates also fined 10 warehouses in Khatunganj Tk 77,000 when they failed to show proper purchase documents that could justify their onion sales rates. After the mobile court drive,

trading remained at a halt for 12 hours across over 50 warehouses located in and around Hamidullah Mia Market of Khatunganj, where other goods like garlic and ginger are also stored and traded.

Traders also blocked the hub's main thoroughfare to stage a demonstration.

"The fines were unjust," they alleged yesterday.

Traditionally, purchase documents are not provided during onion trade, said Faruk Ahmed, a commission agent and owner of the Ira Traders warehouse in Khatunganj.

Actually, importers and traders from different land ports fix onion prices and instruct the traders at Khatunganj over the phone on which rates to sell, he said, adding

that they do not appreciate the price hikes.

Warehouse owners only sell goods in exchange of commission, he said.

The wholesale price onion started to rise at Khatunganj since Thursday, hitting Tk 42-43 per kilogram on Saturday, up from Tk 30-32 on Wednesday.

The recent price hike for onions in India and various land ports in Bangladesh caused this upward trend in Khatunganj, according to numerous traders.

Retail prices at different kitchen markets also rose by Tk 10 to Tk 15 per kilogram.

Most onion warehouses are located at the Hamidullah Mia Market of Khatunganj.

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Use artificial intelligence, machine learning for efficient relief management



MOHAMMAD RASHEDUL ALAM

Bangladesh located to the north-east of South Asia is one of the disaster-prone areas of the region as well the world due to its geographical characteristics, complex topographical features, excessive and mighty river system, monsoon climate and the coastal morphology.

This in turn makes the country's population susceptible to many natural hazards, such as floods, tornados, salinity intrusion, droughts and earthquakes.

Between 1972 and 2019, Bangladesh witnessed over 300 natural disasters.

The two most common natural disasters that hit the country are floods and cyclones, accounting for 47.47 per cent and 28.96 per cent of the total disasters respectively.

However, a humanitarian crisis unlike any other arose with the advent of Covid-19. The novel coronavirus has already dealt a significant blow to the society in general and the global economy, to which Bangladesh belongs.

According to a study, among the 100.22 million people that are at risk both economically and health-wise, 53.64 million of them are extremely poor.

On average, natural disasters have a 1.8 per cent bump in Bangladesh's GDP every year and on top of that, this year the losses brought about by the ongoing pandemic are significantly higher than before.

During any crisis, the top priority for any government is to run their relief operation efficiently so that aid can be distributed to those in need on time.

Amid any such situation, many of us think of providing immediate financial support to all affected people. However, one should remember that Bangladesh's economy has reached a level

where the government is fully capable to handle the issue with their own funds.

Bangladesh's GDP witnessed an annual growth of about 7.76 per cent in the last three years. By the end of 2019, the total GDP stood at \$305 billion, which is one of the highest in the world.

At the end of July this year, the country's forex reserve reached a record \$ 37.10 billion -- 52nd in global ranking and second among the Saarc nations. As per the latest ADP forecast, Bangladesh will post the highest annual GDP growth in Asia in the ongoing fiscal.

Over the years, Bangladesh has earned international recognition for its efficient relief management operations, but still there is plenty of room for improvement.

In Bangladesh, one of the biggest challenges is to identify the right target group or affected people. Even now, we need to manually identify the groups of people in need of aid and because of this the allocated fund usually fails to reach the intended beneficiaries.

Recently, the government has decided to provide 50 lakh poor families impacted by the Covid-19 crisis cash assistance of Tk 2,500 each. But since those in need were not properly identified, a significant portion of fund remained unutilised.

To track the right group of people, a cut in lead time and cost, increased transparency, use of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) technology and effective supply chain management could play an active role in that regard.

Active role of AI and ML for digitalisation of database

This is the right time to work on a technology-based comprehensive national database for successful disaster management. By using AI and ML support, we can overcome this limitation.

We have many sources of data, such as around 130 social safety net programmes that are run by the government. The number of active mobile users stands at 162.92 million while 92.57 million people are registered mobile financial services (MFS) account holders. The monthly number of MFS transactions is about 310 million.

By analysing user transactions, the concerned authorities can identify a person's financial position along with his/her purchasing power and geographic location. However, this will only be possible if



Natural disasters, including floods, eat up 1.8 per cent of Bangladesh's gross domestic product every year. The photo was taken last month in Tangail.

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we use AI, ML and other data sources as obtained from the Bangladesh Election Commission and Bangladesh National Bureau of Statistics.

The social welfare ministry and the disaster management and relief ministry need to form a regulatory body by involving all relevant ministries, Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission, Bangladesh Bank, Bangladesh Army, representatives of mobile financial service providers, mobile operators, developing partners and leading non-governmental organisations to develop a digital database.

The body would also extend assistance during any sort of disasters or pandemic and should have a proactive approach rather than

a reactive one.

There are many other fields where AI and ML are beginning to have clear impacts on disaster preparedness and relief distribution.

Image and information support can be explored using the Bangabandhu Satellite-1 to build a ML model that could estimate the damage to all affected areas and infrastructures in order to reduce the amount of human labour and time required to plan an appropriate response.

There are three main types of relief: food, essentials and cash support. During and post-disaster relief operations and effective supply chain management mainly consist of efficient handling of multiple supply chain activities, such as on time cost-effective procurement,

faster stock fulfilment, safe warehousing facilities and shorter lead times.

On time cost-effective supply

According to an extensive study, there are mainly two types of supply chains operated by the government to assist distressed people. The first is to assist poor people throughout the year on humanitarian grounds while the second is operated during any disaster.

The first one is well planned and can be considered as a part of the government's routine humanitarian activities but the second is unplanned and sudden.

Supply chain activities for disaster relief management has plenty of room for improvement.

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