

BANGLADESH UPDATE

1,527

New cases in 24hrs


3,86,086

Total cases


5,623

Deaths


3,00,738

Recoveries


1,105,868

Deaths


39,385,692

Total cases

Fashion brands accused of exploiting workers at risk of layoffs

THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION, Dhaka

Millions of garment workers could lose their jobs as global brands are demanding price cuts and delaying payments to suppliers who are desperate for orders to survive the new coronavirus pandemic, US researchers said yesterday.

Suppliers have been asked to make their prices an average of 12% cheaper than last year, research by the Center for Global Workers' Rights (CGWR) at Penn State University found, describing such practices as "leveraging desperation".

In a survey of 75 factories in 15 countries, suppliers said they had to wait an average of 77 days for payment, compared to 43 days before the pandemic, raising fears of further factory closures in an industry employing 60 million people worldwide.

"We are seeing a dramatic squeeze down of price, reduced orders and late payment," said Mark Anner, author of the report and director of the CGWR.

"This worries me for the wellbeing of the suppliers and the workers. This will affect the small and medium suppliers first."

Fashion companies cancelled orders worth billions of dollars earlier this year as Covid-19 shuttered stores worldwide, leading to wage losses of up to \$5.8 billion, according to pressure group Clean Clothes Campaign.

Suppliers in countries including Cambodia, Ethiopia, Guatemala, India, Mexico, Peru and Vietnam told CGWR that they had already laid off 10% of their workers and would have to cut another 35% of their labour force if order reductions continued.

"If this figure holds true for the entire industry globally, millions of garment workers could be out of work," CGWR said.

Manufacturers and labour rights groups said some orders that were cancelled or suspended earlier in the year were being restored, along with new orders, but they were less than the number of firms jostling for contracts.

"Buyers are taking advantage of this," said Anner, dubbing it an "emerging second crisis" for suppliers after the

billions lost in cancelled and unpaid orders earlier in the year.

"It's a little hard to see right away the gravity of the (second) crisis because the new order volume is being mixed with the pay up of old orders that were pent up. It's hiding the new crisis, which is the decline in order value."

More than half of manufacturers surveyed said they would have to close down if the "sourcing squeeze" continued.

The Thomson Reuters Foundation spoke to five garment manufacturers in Bangladesh - which hosts more than half of the 75 suppliers involved in the study - who said they had been forced to cut their prices by 5% to 15%.

Iqbal Hamid Quraishi, a factory owner and a director at the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, said order volumes had risen since September but prices had fallen.

"There isn't much room to negotiate with brands. They tell us that if we don't agree to their price, they can go to other suppliers," said Quraishi, adding that the industry could recover if the second wave of Covid-19 did not hit sales.

The Geneva-based International Organisation of Employers (IOE), a global business network, said brands and suppliers were trying to find solutions in "extremely difficult circumstances".

"Brands ... have shown responsibility by engaging in the joint Call to Action in the Garment Industry, which aims to support manufacturers to survive economic disruption ... and to protect garment workers," said IOE spokeswoman Jean Milligan.

The Call to Action, written in April by the IOE and global unions, seeks to protect workers' incomes and support manufacturers during the Covid-19 crisis by lobbying for loans, social protection schemes and unemployment programmes.

The British-based Ethical Trading Initiative, whose members include H&M and Primark, said that the pandemic was not an excuse to row back on human rights and that it was in everyone's best interest to ensure a sustainable and robust supply chain.



With the Durga Puja only four days away, rickshaw vans carry Durga idols to temples in Rangpur city. The idols have been brought from Uttarghonshyam village in Lamonirhat's Kaliganj upazila. In the wake of the coronavirus outbreak, health safety guidelines will be followed during the celebration of the festival this year. The photo was taken in Rangpur city's Mulatol area yesterday.

PHOTO: KONGKON KARMAKER

BTCL strives to rise again

FROM PAGE 1

When BTCL started its journey in 2008, it inherited 8.66 lakh users.

Since then, it has seen a gradual decline; according to official data, the number of traditional telephone users in Bangladesh at present is 5.30 lakh.

This figure pales into insignificance when compared to the number of mobile phone users.

There are currently over 166 million mobile phone SIM users in the country, with a person aged over 18 and having a national ID card being able to have a maximum of 15 SIMs.

Less users means less revenue and the BTCL is doing poorly, currently surviving on government subsidies.

In the financial year 2008-2009, BTCL earned Tk 1,689.36 crore with a net profit of around Tk 106 crore.

Eleven years down the line, revenue has almost halved -- BTCL earned Tk 886.81 crore, incurring a loss of around Tk 368 crore in the last fiscal year (2018-2019).

With an exception in the 2012-2013 financial year, BTCL has been in the red for the last 10 years.

A BTCL official, preferring not to be named, recently told The Daily Star that they were facing a cash crunch, struggling to provide maintenance and pay salaries.

The picture in India is almost similar. The state-owned Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) was once a highly profitable company in India, but it has been in serious financial trouble since 2010, according to reports of Indian media.

Another government-owned telecom Mahanagar Telephone Nigam Limited (MTNL) has also been in the red for nearly the past one decade.

The government in October last year announced a Rs 69,000 crore revival package for these two loss-making state-owned companies, which included strengthening of the finances through

sovereign bonds, monetisation of assets and a guarantee to provide 4G spectrum.

However, the telecom service providers are still incurring losses, according to media reports.

BTCL'S SURVIVAL BID
BTCL MD Rafiqul Matin said they have undertaken several new projects to make the headline telephone multifaceted to increase the number of users.

"Our main challenge is to restore customer confidence by improving the quality of services. We are now addressing any complaints from customers within one to three days," said Matin, adding that they have introduced the app "Teleshba" for the purpose.

"BTCL is not only thinking about providing telephone services but also multifaceted services including the internet. Customers will get broadband internet on the same line with our telephone connection," he told this newspaper recently.

He added that the BTCL has started providing 11-digit numbers so that users can continue to have the same number regardless of what district they live in.

"We will also introduce Alap, a mobile app like Viber and WhatsApp, so that users can communicate from anywhere through it."

As part of extending its network, he said, BTCL is working to install optical fibre in 1,217 unions across the country.

"Our Wi-Fi will be installed in every educational institution in the country. Our internet will be more affordable and powerful than any other broadband company," claimed the BTCL MD.

However, several headline telephone users told this reporter that they would still think twice before availing the services of BTCL due to its past track record of mismanagement, bribery, and poor customer service.

"Even if they provide internet service through the telephone line, I have to think whether I will take it or not."

Because it's not a matter of how fast the internet is or how much it costs, it's a matter of how good they are in providing customer service," said Badal Chowdhury, a 50-year-old businessman living in the Ramna area.

"Private companies at least assure me that even if the internet connection is disconnected at midnight, they can repair it then. The government company will not provide me with this service -- I am pretty sure of this."

Badal also recalled how he suffered with his landline, which often remained out of order, and had to bribe the lineman to fix it after long delays when the government-owned company enjoyed a monopoly of the country's telecommunications network.

While low confidence in public services in general is not uncommon, BTCL continues to face a deluge of complaints from users about frequently disconnected or dead landlines even as it says it is implementing more and better services to attract customers.

Earlier this year, Matin went on Facebook Live to apologise to customers and personally respond to questions about BTCL services -- a move which its officials said was a first for a state-owned enterprise directly reaching out to customers on social media.

"The telephone and internet services are necessary 24/7. It's not a nine to five job," Badal said.

A freelancer by profession, 30-year-old Navid echoed the same but added that in his experience, BTCL had improved its services in recent years.

"I have seen how my family used to have to run from office to office to fix a damaged line. It took about three to four weeks to fix the line after filing applications at different places," said Navid.

"But if you complain now, it will be fixed on that day or the next day."

Four including 3 of a family

FROM PAGE 1

All the deceased were car passengers. Two of them died on the spot.

The dead are Hirok Bhuiyan, 42, of Narail, his sister Shilpi Begum, 32, her daughter Raysha, 8, and his friend Ashrafal, 40.

Train communications remained halted for around two years after the accident.

Officials of Noapara fire service rushed to the spot and rescued the injured with the help of locals and

took them to the local upazila health complex.

Iffat Sharmin, physician of Abhoyagar Upazila Health Complex, said they referred two injured to Khulna Medical College Hospital (KMCH) as they were critically wounded.

Shaown Begum, wife of the deceased Hirok, and her one-year-old daughter Humaira were undergoing treatment at KMCH.

Global daily cases

FROM PAGE 1

In the Midwest, daily new cases hit a record on Wednesday with over 22,000 new infections. The positive test rate tops 30% in South Dakota and 20% in Idaho and Wisconsin.

Ten states on Thursday reported record increases in new cases, including Wisconsin with 4,000 new cases. California remains the state with the most total cases followed by Texas, Florida, New York and Georgia. Those five states account for over 40% of all reported Covid-19 cases in the nation.

Top US infectious diseases expert Dr Anthony Fauci said Americans should rethink their usual plans for Thanksgiving gatherings considering the situation.

As for Thanksgiving, when millions of Americans travel to gather with families and friends, Fauci says this November may need to be different. "We really have to be careful this time that each individual family evaluates the risk-benefit."

VIRUS CURFEW

Europe on Thursday recorded the highest number of cases, at more than 150,000, the highest since the start of the pandemic, and several countries on the continent now believe they have entered a second wave.

Millions of French people were looking forward to a last night of freedom yesterday before a Covid-19 curfew in Paris and other large cities comes into force for a least a month, prompted by an alarming surge in new cases.

The curfew aims to keep some 20 million people home from 9:00 pm to 6:00 am -- 30 percent of the French population.

Across Europe, governments were frantically trying to ease an alarming second wave of coronavirus cases while avoiding a full-on national lockdown that would batter their struggling economies still further.

Millions in England including London were just hours away from stricter restrictions, including a ban on household mixing, while bars and restaurants closed in Spain's northeastern region of Catalonia.

In Greece, the densely populated northern area of Kozani went into a new lockdown, reports AFP.

India's tally of infections stood at

7.37 million yesterday, having risen by 63,371 in the last 24 hours, health ministry data showed. Deaths from Covid-19 infections rose by 895 to 112,161, the ministry said.

Meanwhile, the WHO study which casted doubt on remdesivir triggered a row.

Gilead Sciences Inc., the US company that developed the drug, said the findings appeared inconsistent with evidence from other studies validating the clinical benefit of remdesivir, which was used to treat US President Donald Trump's coronavirus infection.

But Richard Peto, an independent statistician hired by the WHO to scrutinize the results of its Solidarity trial, dismissed Gilead's criticism.

"It's a reliable result, don't let anybody tell you otherwise, because they'll try to," Peto told reporters. "This is real world evidence."

The results of the trial, announced by the WHO on Thursday, dealt a blow to one of the few drugs being used to treat people with Covid-19.

The UN health agency said remdesivir appeared to have little or no effect on keeping people alive or on the length of hospital stays among patients with the respiratory disease.

Its trial was conducted on 11,266 adult patients in over 30 countries and its findings may shift the focus of treatments away from antivirals such as remdesivir to new monoclonal antibodies which the WHO has said could be added to its studies.

The European Union has given remdesivir emergency authorization and agreed to a 1 billion euro (\$1.2 billion) remdesivir deal on Tuesday.

The European Medicines Agency said it would review the trial data "to see if any changes are needed to the way these medicines are used."

Some scientists said Gilead's complaints merit scrutiny.

Differences in patients who participated in the trial at hundreds of clinical sites may undermine the quality of the data, said Prof. Peter Galle, who oversees infectiology at Germany's Mainz university hospital.

But he added: "This provides more evidence that remdesivir is no panacea."

US wants Dhaka on its side

FROM PAGE 1

Japan and India, to advance the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS).

Biegun's visit to India and Bangladesh and the upcoming visits by US secretary of defence and state to India later this month are testimony to that effort.

Experts say though the US emphasises on free, open, rules-based Indo-Pacific, which is actually great, it also has a security component meant to counter China.

Bangladesh, though a small country in size, has become important for all of these big powers, they said.

Interestingly, Bangladesh has good relations with all of them. India, the closest neighbour having the warmest relations with Bangladesh, has joined the US-led alliance and would naturally want Bangladesh to join it too, they added.

An obvious question can arise here -- how would Bangladesh act if that happens?

"I think Bangladesh has a clear foreign policy -- Friendship to all and malice to none. Bangladesh has been actually maintaining this policy quite well over the years," said Munshi Faiz Ahmad, a former ambassador to China, replying to a query on the issue.

He said Bangladesh's major objectives are trade and economic development. There are not any major military threats that the country needs to adjust to its policy emphasising defence cooperation.

Therefore, it would be wise for the country not to join any alliance when it

has security component, he added.

Does that mean that Bangladesh will maintain a fine balance in terms of its relations with foreign countries? Munshi Faiz said national priorities should determine how Bangladesh deals with the foreign countries. For example, Bangladesh now buys majority of its arms from China because it finds it competitive.

"If we now want to buy arms from the USA, can we afford it? No. Simply because US arms will be much more expensive," he said.

Munshi Faiz, also former chairman of the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS), however, said the US is the largest single ready-made garment buyer and the second largest investor in Bangladesh. Bangladesh cannot disengage with the US.

Again, China has large investments here in various infrastructure projects that are extremely vital. Bangladesh and Japan too have good investments in connectivity and infrastructure projects.

The geopolitical analyst said, "We cannot leave one and join the other. Rather, to boost our trade and investment, we need to boost our relations with all based on our national interests."

"At the same time, we, as a nation, want peace and stability, not war ... It is not that we will balance with both sides and lose both. Rather, we will act based on our priorities. In that case, the friends of Bangladesh, if really they are, will have nothing to say, at least publicly."

Prof Lailufar Yasmin of Dhaka

University's International Relations department said the China-led Belt and Road Initiative and the US-led IPS can be complementary to each other. Bangladesh looks at the both initiatives from that perspective, because confrontation will yield nothing good."

She said over the years, Bangladesh has improved its infrastructure. Besides, the purchasing power of its people has gone up significantly. Also, the country's geographical location makes it an attractive place for investments.

Therefore, many countries are now showing interests here. The important thing for Bangladesh is not to be on the side of any alliance, but to further improve relations with all for trade and economic development. Bangladesh's skilled labour force and manufacturing capability in pharmaceutical, textile and other sectors during the Covid-19 are its strength.

"For competitive prices and quality, others will be coming to us; we don't need to go to others. We have been maintaining our relations with all well and will need to continue it, instead of leaving someone and joining someone else."

Asked how the country should consider the perception that certain country's loan can lead to debt trap or corruption, Lailufar Yasmin said Bangladesh experts will need to be careful, see the terms and conditions critically before signing any deal.

"It will depend on our domestic capacity and integrity," she added.

Nobody will go hungry in the country

FROM PAGE 1

Hasina said her government has been working to build a developed and prosperous country free from hunger and poverty envisioned by the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

The premier got connected to the seminar, organised by agriculture ministry, from the Gono Bhaban while others joined it from the Pan Pacific Sonargaon Hotel, Dhaka through a video conference.

The World Food Day is being observed in Bangladesh as elsewhere in the world with the theme "Grow, nourish, sustain together. Our actions are our future."

Briefly spelling out of the measures taken by her government to face the onslaught of the Covid-19 pandemic on the people's livelihoods and the country's economy, Hasina said, "We have been working with a special focus to make sure that the people don't suffer

amid the coronavirus outbreak."

She said the government has allocated Tk 9,500 crore in agriculture mainly to inspire farmers to keep continuing their efforts in producing foods so that no scarcity of food is surfaced in the country due to the pandemic.

The premier said her government has given stimulus packages of Tk 5,000 for agriculture for the coronavirus period to keep the food production uninterrupted.

She once again called upon all to bring every inch of land under cultivation to ensure food security as many countries in the world might face food shortage.

"There is a possibility of famine as the world got stuck due to the Covid-19 pandemic. But Bangladesh must not be affected by it and its people would not suffer from it."

Bangladesh moves

FROM PAGE 1

"Overall, this is an excellent performance [for Bangladesh]," said KAS Murshid, director general of Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS).

It needs to be seen which year's data has been used to prepare the index, what are the variables used and what factors contributed to the improvement, he said.

Murshid said as it is a relative ranking, Bangladesh did better than others in agriculture.

"Even though growth slowed in recent years, the country's agricultural performance has been good."

Looking forward, further diversification of agriculture is needed apart from increasing productivity, he observed.

Besides, ensuring food security has become essential because of the uncertainty created by the Covid-19 pandemic, he said, adding that this has become more important than ever before. "We saw in the past that food was not available even though we had money to purchase."

Besides, still a lot of people are poor. Many suffer from malnutrition. Attention has to be paid to this area to realise the potential of the country's human resources, Murshid said.

The GHI is a peer-reviewed annual report designed to comprehensively measure and track hunger at the global, regional, and country levels. Its aim is to trigger action to reduce hunger around the world.

It calculates the levels of hunger and undernutrition based on four indicators -- undernourishment, child wasting, child stunting, and child mortality.

Out of 100 points, 0 is the best score (no hunger) and 100 is the worst. In practice, neither of these extremes is reached.

According to the report, 17 countries, mostly from Europe and the Americas, with scores less than 5 have collectively been ranked at 1-17 in the index. North Macedonia and Russia Federation have been placed at 18th place with both scoring 5.2.

According to the index, three countries -- Chad, Timor-Leste, and Madagascar -- suffer from levels of hunger that are alarming and 31 have serious levels of hunger.

Chad has the highest score of 44.7. At regional level, hunger is highest in the regions of Africa south of the Sahara and South Asia, whose 2020 GHI scores are 27.8 and 26.0, respectively.

South Asia has the largest number of undernourished people in the world, the report mentioned.

Despite declines in recent years, child mortality in South Asia is still unacceptably high, with improvements in child nutrition needed, it said.

The mortality rate of children under five in South Asia as of 2018 was 4.1 percent, compared with 9.2 percent in 2000.

According to the report, the high child stunting rate in South Asia is driven by multiple factors.

The key factors that contribute to stunting in the region are poor infants and young child feeding practices, poor nutrition among women before and during pregnancy, and poor sanitation practices.

Data from 1991 through 2014 for Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan showed that stunting is concentrated among children from households facing multiple forms of deprivation, including poor dietary diversity, low levels of maternal education, and household poverty.

The report said the Covid-19 pandemic has undermined food and nutrition security for many, and its effects will likely ripple into the future.

It is critical to understand that the GHI scores presented in the 2020 report do not yet reflect the impact of Covid-19 on hunger and undernutrition, said the report.

Nonetheless, the GHI scores and indicator data point to the parts of the world that are already suffering from hunger and undernutrition, putting them in a precarious and vulnerable position to face the current crisis, it added.

To keep the wheels of the country's economy turning, the government has given stimulus packages in every sector worth Tk 112,633 crore which is four percent of the GDP, she added.

"We have been working tirelessly to give the people a good living even during the pandemic," the PM continued.

The premier greeted the UN's World Food Programme on winning Nobel peace prize and the FAO on its 75th founding anniversary.

Food Minister Sadhan Chandra Majumder, and Fisheries and Livestock Minister SM Rezaul Karim, spoke at the event, chaired by Agriculture Minister Muhammad Abdur Razzaque.

A recorded speech of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Director General Qu Dongyu was played at the function.