

Mobile repairers thrive on telecoms growth

MD FAZLUR RAHMAN

Sajib Ahmed does not think much about the growth of the country's mobile phone sector, but he is thankful to the handy device for helping him find work in his homeland.

The 23-year-old sat in concentration, repairing the ring tone on a mobile handset. "If I were not in this profession, I could have ended up going to the Middle East, where life is not easy."

He told The Daily Star that his work was not bad as a profession as many might believe. With a good hand, anyone will be able to earn about Tk 25,000 a month.

Ever since the mobile technology made a debut in Bangladesh in 1997, the industry has gone from zero coverage to countrywide coverage now.

There are about 6.6 crore cell-phone users in Bangladesh currently, while the numbers are expected to reach 10 crore in the next few years.

Apart from creating hundreds of white-collar jobs, the sector has paved the way for many others to find a means of employment on the side, like setting up small shops to sell talk-time or accessories, and repairing.

These auxiliary businesses are growing by keeping pace with the growing telecoms industry. It has created jobs for around 15 lakh people, according to estimates by Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC), the industry regulator.

Monir Mollah, 23, co-owns a small mobile servicing shop in Farmview Supermarket in Farmgate, Dhaka.

Mollah, from Pirojpur, took part in a training programme at Eastern Plaza, a popular mall in Dhaka, for three months at a



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Mobile repair is a job that requires full concentration.

cost of Tk 8,000. He, however, said three months were not enough to learn all of communication technology.

"The centres can only give an idea of the work," said Mollah, also an undergraduate student at a college in the capital.

He has been in the trade for

the last five years and is confident about repairing any mobile malfunction. He works from 10am to 8pm every day and charges between Tk 100 and Tk 600 per repair, depending on the severity of the problem.

Shaidul Islam Apu, 25, works

for RK Electronics, a mobile services and sales centre at Eastern Plaza, for a living. He said he did not receive any training but can work on any handset.

He questioned the standards of the local training centres, saying: "They train students for

three to six months, but they only sell certificates in the name of imparting training."

On an average, Apu receives repair orders between six to eight a day and charges minimum Tk 200.

He plans to expand operations, as the country's telecom market is growing fast.

He said there are at least a 100 people like him who are making a living out of repairing mobile handsets at Eastern Plaza alone.

All the parts used in repairing the handsets are imported from China. If Bangladesh could produce the parts, the cost repairing might go down, repairers said.

Nazir Hossain of Touch Electronics did not receive any formal training either. He has been in the repair business for eight years now. He learnt the tricks of the trade while working at a servicing store owned by his brother.

Despite receiving no formal education or training on the subject, Nazir said the local repairers could match those of brand mobile makers.

He repairs seven to eight handsets a day and charges Tk 200 on average, depending on the work.

Mohammad Hossain has been repairing handsets for nine years with no formal training.

"I was always keen on electronic gadgets from childhood, which has helped me a lot get into the profession. I like to play with the handsets," he told The Daily Star while working a handset at a corner of Nayeem Electronics at the Eastern Plaza.

On the mushrooming of service centres across the country, he said: "Anyone who just can open the handsets, opens up a repair shop."

He said although he did not receive any academic educa-

tion, many repairers are said to be better than their counterparts working for the branded handset-makers, thanks to years of experience.

Sajib Ahmed is one of them. Although the mobile technician has taken part in training, he credited his expertise to on-the-job experience.

Ahmed, who works at Puspita Telecom at Motalee Plaza, one of the country's largest mobile markets, said there are 250 mobile repairers in the market.

On average, he repairs 20 sets a day. To successfully repair sets requires concentration, he said. "Training institutions do not teach much."

Eastern Mobile Training Institute, a training institute at Eastern Plaza, has about 45 students. It focuses on the techniques of trouble-shooting for a handset.

Officials of the centre said after completing the three-month session, which costs Tk 12,000, the students would be able to work as a repairer and thus, become self-employed and launch his own business.

"We give hands-on training along with basic information on the technology," said Mahbubur Rahman Khan, owner of the centre.

"We not only teach them to repair handsets, we also teach them the basics of computers and the internet," he said.

Khan said most trainees who come here do not have much educational qualifications. They do not know about computers, the mobile technology and most cannot even unlock the handsets. Their future is uncertain in most cases.

"But after receiving training here, they can at least build a career in the profession."

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Food doesn't cause crises, governments do

JOHN FOLEY

Food prices are rising to dangerous levels. There is talk of a coming crisis, like the ones that produced riots around the world in 2008 and 1974. Many of the ingredients of a disaster are present, but governments can stop it before it causes too much damage.

A warning sign is the price of traded staples like wheat, corn and rice. Prices shot up in 2010, soaring 26 percent from June to November and brushing 2008's peaks, according to the United Nations' FAO Food Price Index. That hits poor countries which import much of their food, such as the Philippines, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan. High prices deprive the poor, who already spend as much as half of their income on food. The market still clears, but at a riot-inducingly high price.

For most big countries, food prices are a domestic affair. Just 12 percent of cereals produced are traded across borders. In countries that grow their own, like China, Russia and India, buyers often pay government-set prices that have little link to global markets. Yet the self-servers are suffering too.

China, which only really uses global markets for soybeans, is fretting over soaring shop prices for everything from pork to seaweed. In India, a fifth of the population is undernourished, according to the United Nations. Both countries have their quirks in India, awful infrastructure means a third of

produce spoils before it reaches the market but something is clearly making the problem worse.

It isn't shortages. True, demand for staple grains is predicted to rise 2 percent in 2011, even as production falls 4 percent. But grain reserves run to almost 17 percent of total usage, according to Rabobank around the level generally seen as a sensible buffer. Nor are the main problems population trends or changing eating habits in developing markets. That extra demand may be making the world a bit more crisis-prone, but more productive, mechanised farming methods in China, India and Africa have potential to create some slack.

The main cause looks to be too much money. Governments have effectively printed the stuff to help their economies recover. This has created two side effects. First, investors have bought exposure to commodities as an economic hedge. Second, the price of foodstuffs has been bid up as low interest rates reduce the opportunity cost of hoarding them especially in China, where money supply grew by almost 20 percent in 2010.

Whether those high prices turn into a crisis depends on two things. First, short-sighted policy responses. Food producers often ban exports when they fear shortages or price spikes are coming. Sometimes they are right to worry. Russia's recent droughts have left it with a genu-



Chinese customers shop at the vegetable section of a supermarket in Beijing.

ine wheat shortfall. But India introduced a rice export ban in 2007 when it still had a sizeable surplus, helping to double the world price.

By 2008, over 30 countries had some kind of controls in place. Export bans cause bubbles abroad; they also stop farmers from benefitting from high prices that would get them

growing more.

The second flash point is the oil price. That increases transport costs for food. But it also encourages politicians to divert grains into biofuels, which become competitive when oil hits \$60 per barrel. The average oil price in 2011 is forecast at \$84, according to a Reuters poll.

The United States, which

supplies two-thirds of the world's corn exports, diverted huge amounts into biofuel in the run-up to 2008's crisis, causing 70 percent of the rise in corn prices, according to the IMF. That distortion was passed straight on to the world's poor.

Food riots in 2011 are possible, but not inevitable. Granted, the world will have to get used to

more food scares as the population expands and the diets of the poor get richer. But the moment when humanity outgrows the earth is thankfully not yet here. Cool-headed policies can still prevent a real crisis.

The author is a Reuters Breakingviews columnist. The opinions expressed are his own.

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