

Business as usual, for some

Others bear the brunt of a 48-hour nationwide shutdown, now in force



ANISUR RAHMAN

People wait for transport to get home after arriving at Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka yesterday. A 48-hour shutdown snapped the country's transport links.

SARWAR A CHOWDHURY and
ABDULLAH MAMUN

The business community has presented an assortment of reactions after day-one of the 48-hour countrywide hartal called by BNPLed four-party alliance that began yesterday.

It has left marked impacts in certain sectors, but no or little bearing on others. The stockmarket, to start with, felt a very slight impact with a thin presence of investors.

But not all sectors got away so easy. The telecoms industry endured the latest strike, especially the people responsible for work in the technical and service-oriented departments.

Industry insiders say the strike does not hit company revenues, but it adversely affects service delivery. Some telecom companies have to manage the operations and customer-care offices with additional spend-

ing. They provided hotel accommodations for those employees in the vicinity with extra allowances.

"At least 80 percent of our employees cannot come to the office. Although it is possible to work from home with the support of the internet, a presence in the office is of different significance," says Kazi Monirul Kabir, chief communications officer of Grameenphone, the country's largest mobile phone operator.

Bidyut Kumar Basu, chief marketing officer of Robi, says revenue is not much affected by the shutdown. "Even though there are not too many business calls, personal calls rise."

"But we face a problem when any network equipment goes down," says Basu. "One or two days can be managed, but frequent strikes become a fear factor for the company," he adds.

Mahfuzur Rahman, director of technical

and corporate affairs of Citycell, says the network is always an emergency service. "So, we must uphold it, even on hartals. The overall work flow is definitely disrupted on a hartal day."

He says they need to keep at least 100 to 150 people in temporary houses, such as a hotel, due to the shutdown.

"Our SIM card sales drop by 75 percent on hartal days," said Mashidur Rahman, general manager of regulatory affairs of Banglalink.

"A number of our sights (base transceiver stations) run on fuel. We sometimes face a scarcity of fuel at the sight due to a hartal," he says, adding that the supply of fuel drops significantly on strikes.

On stockmarket frontiers, the bourses remained open, with trade taking place in full swing, except for fewer retail investors.

There were days, even a few years back, when trading remained closed on strikes imposed by

the political parties. But those are bygone days. The physical presence of investors is no longer an important determinant of trade.

The rise in share prices and a higher turnover on the premier bourse yesterday from the previous day also proved that stock transactions were not affected by the political party imposed shutdown.

Technology and a shift from the manual system to a digital one are the major factors aiding the country's stockmarket to function effectively even on a strike.

"Investors can see share transactions on the internet from any place and can place, buy or sell orders through telephone, SMS and email," Saiful Islam, vice-chairman of BRAC-EPL Investment.

"So, the investors' physical presence is not an issue," said Islam, also managing director of BRAC-EPL Stock Brokerage.

The attendance of employees at the offices

of the stockmarket regulator, bourses, stockbrokers and dealers, merchant banks and asset management companies was almost hundred percent.

"No extra benefit was given to the officers," says the chief executive of a bank brokerage house.

However, he says there were a few clients, which was expected.

Traders were busier at the different stockbrokers than other regular days, for receiving buy and sell orders from the clients over telephone.

Lutfur Kabir, an investor, says he is generally present at the trading house. But yesterday, he chose to trade over his mobile phone.

"It is difficult for me to go Motijheel on a hartal day. Basically my family does not allow me to go outside on such a situation, fearing violence on the streets. But, I traded over telephone."

City life realigns itself in times of hartal

SOHEL PARVEZ

It was half past midday. A rickshaw van, laden with medicines in paper cartons, approached slowly towards the Matsya Bhaban circle in Dhaka.

The van crossed the intersection. Minutes later, two more vans passed through the road in front of the fisheries department headquarters at Segun Bagicha.

The vans were used by a pharmaceuticals company, Renata Ltd, to deliver medicines in times of hartal. The company's delivery pickups were off the roads for fear of vandalism.

All roads leading to the intersection were mostly bare, as a 48-hour strike began early yesterday morning, called by the opposition BNP and its allies.

The strike hampered traffic from one corner of the city to another, putting daily routine work in disarray.

"We are not using our delivery trucks because of the strike. That's

why, our company has hired rickshaw vans," said Mahmudul Hasan, a sales representative of Renata Ltd. He was sitting on his van next to the cartons of drugs.

Hasan was on his way to Mohammadpur to deliver medicines. His colleague was going to Dhanmondi to distribute saline; while the other was on route to another clinic in Hatirpool.

Renata hired over 20 rickshawvans to ensure delivery of drugs as the hartal was in force.

"There is no scope to compromise with life-saving drugs. That's why we have hired vans to ensure timely delivery," Hasan said.

The movement of pedestrians on sidewalks was thin as well. Roadside teashops, which are usually abuzz with customers, were mostly idle. The same was true for groceries and restaurants.

The strike has cut into the incomes of businesses.

"We have some regular customers who come to shop with their own



AMRAN HOSSAIN

A petrol pump attendant at Mohakhali in Dhaka takes a nap as the number of customers dropped due to a general strike across the country yesterday.

vehicles. Today they have not come," said Abu Sayeed Reaz, a salesman at Tanvir General Store at Segun Bagicha.

He said sales slumped because of a fall in the number of customers. "On other days, the sales of beverages remain high. Today it is low because of a lack of public movement."

Pradip Roy, the in-charge of an outlet of Grameen Sweetmeat Bakery and Foods Ltd, at Bijoy Nagar, said they opened their shop two hours late. "We usually open the showroom at 8am on normal days. Today, we opened at 10 in the morning."

"Customer turnout has slumped by almost half due to the strike," Mohammad Parvez, manager of Hotel New Star, a restaurant, in Farmgate, one of the busiest spots in Dhaka on other days.

Parvez said the restaurant logs an average turnover of Tk 30,000 in sales on workdays. "But we have lost a fourth of our average sales because of the hartal."