

Take steps to save farmers from debt burden

Agriculture development activist Shykh Seraj rolls out budget recommendations

SOHEL PARVEZ

THE government should take special steps and effective measures to salvage indebted farmers who have suffered losses for failure to get fair prices for their produce, particularly high-value vegetables and other crops, said Shykh Seraj, an agriculture development activist and journalist.

"Hundreds of entrepreneurial farmers have suffered losses in the last three years in the absence of a congenial atmosphere and certainty to market their produce. Many have become bankrupt, while some face lawsuits for loan defaults," Seraj said in a recent interview with The Daily Star.

He shared his views after he gathered the concerns and recommendations of farmers through a series of discussions in remote areas to prepare a list of recommendations in favour of farmers ahead of the national budget for fiscal 2015-16.

Seraj arranges a pre-budget meet, Krishi Budget, Krishoker Budget (Farm Budget, Farmers' Budget), at grassroots levels where farmers share their concerns and demands in front of top policymakers and public officials.

Seraj has been holding such discussions since fiscal 2005-06 as part of his effort to empower the usually neglected growers under an initiative of Channel i television's programme, Hridoye Mati O Manush.

This year, he has prepared a set of 21 recommendations for consideration in the next budget. Citing a hike in the production of high value crops, Seraj said enterprising farmers emerged and contributed greatly to agricultural success in the last decade.

However, recurrent political turmoil and other bottlenecks have sent many of those entrepreneurial growers into losses. A section of them cultivated high-value crops by borrowing from NGOs, local money lenders and banks, but many of them could not repay the loans, he said.

"They have played a great role in boosting production and marketing of high value crops. Their untiring labour and courageous initiatives have changed the face of country's agriculture," he said, adding that such enterprising spirit of a section of farmers have influenced others to grow high-value crops as well.

In these circumstances, there is a risk of rupture in the success of high-value crop cultivation, said Seraj suggesting the government either waive or reschedule those loans.



Shykh Seraj

"Farmers are investors. They should be treated and given benefits like industrialists."

The government should immediately slap on duties to curb soaring rice imports and rescue farmers from losses during the current boro harvesting season, said Seraj.

The government should take measures so that rice and paddy prices rise in the domestic market and farmers get fair prices, he added. "It is not clear why the zero duty on rice imports was allowed even after self sufficiency. We demand prompt action from the government to protect farmers from losses due to very low prices of paddy."

"Farmers are deprived of getting fair prices of the newly harvested boro paddy. They blame the huge imports for falling prices of their produce," he said after holding a series of grassroots level discussions with farmers in the last one month.

He demanded the food ministry buy the paddy and rice directly from the growers. "Farmers have never been able to sell

paddy and wheat at government-declared prices although the food ministry claims to buy the grains from farmers," said Seraj, who clinched the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation AH Boerma Award in 2009 for pioneering contribution towards increasing public awareness in all aspects of agriculture and development.

Farmers have been raising the issue at pre-budget discussions for the last decade, while the government has also been making promises of solving the issue; however, no proper infrastructure or arrangement are yet in place, he said.

"With rural road infrastructure in place, the government should open purchasing centres there to buy food grains directly from the growers," said Seraj, citing that farmers want the government to establish purchasing centres at union levels.

Seraj also suggested the government place a temporary restriction on the import of farm produce at the time of

harvest of any particular crop.

The agriculture development activist proposed an integrated excavation of rivers and canals, formation of effective farmer's cooperatives, introduction of crop insurance, steps to encourage pesticide-free and organic cultivation, formation of an agricultural price commission for major crops and modernisation of agricultural extension systems to serve farmers.

He also suggested taking steps to make the union agricultural information centres more effective and establishment of soil test labs at union levels. Seraj urged the government to protect the local tea gardeners and industry from imports as well.

To maintain vigour in farm mechanisation, he appealed to the government to continue subsidy support to farmers to buy farm machinery. He also urged the government to reduce import duties on power tiller parts to encourage local assembling.

HSBC subsidiary announces sale of 10pc stake in Chinese bank

AFP, Hong Kong

Hang Seng Bank, a Hong Kong-based subsidiary of British banking giant HSBC, on Tuesday announced the sale of a 10 percent stake in China's Industrial Bank in a transaction that could be worth \$4.74 billion.

The sale will leave Hang Seng Bank with a 0.88 percent holding in Industrial Bank. The move was made in two separate deals, with around half the stake being sold in February and the other half to be sold shortly.

According to an announcement made on Hang Seng Bank's website, the two transactions will raise a total of up to HK\$36.78 billion (\$4.74 billion) before expenses.

"Hang Seng Bank and HSBC consider that the transaction represents an opportunity to realise part of Hang Seng Bank's investment in Industrial Bank, taking into account the current market conditions," the firms said in the joint announcement.

"Hang Seng Bank expects to use the net sale proceeds of the transaction principally to support future business expansion," they added.

HSBC, which holds a 62.14 percent stake in Hang Seng Bank, is headquartered in Britain but has strong links to Hong Kong.

It was founded in Hong Kong and Shanghai in 1865, but has been based in Britain since 1992.

The bank recently launched a review on whether to remain headquartered in Britain, however, as the country increases regulation and taxation of the financial sector.

Toyota, Nissan recall 6.5m cars globally over exploding airbag fears

AFP, Tokyo

Japanese auto giants Toyota and Nissan on Wednesday said they were recalling 6.5 million vehicles globally in the latest chapter of an exploding airbag crisis linked to several deaths.

The world's biggest automaker said its recall of five million vehicles affected 35 models globally produced between 2003 and 2007, while Nissan said it was calling back 1.56 million vehicles also due to faulty airbags made by embattled supplier Takata.

"This will affect many of our markets, including Japan, Europe and North America," a Nissan spokesman told AFP, adding that the explosion risk was among a range of problems seen in the defective airbags.

"There might be many factors. (But) we have seen risks that the metal casing for inflators can malfunction."

Nissan's recall affects a range of models produced between 2004 and 2008. Both firms said there were no reports of deaths or injuries linked to their latest recall.

The announcement comes after some 20 million vehicles produced by automakers also including General Motors and Honda were recalled because of the risk that their Takata-made airbags could improperly inflate and rupture, potentially firing deadly shrapnel at the occupants.



A GLITTERING NIGHT AT DENIM EXPO



Models sashay down the catwalk at a fashion show at the concluding session of Bangladesh Denim Expo at the Radisson hotel in Dhaka on Tuesday.

AMRAN HOSSAIN

