Belgian Blue can meet demand for cow meat

Shykh Seraj

THE day was the 7th of June, 2016 when I arrived in the country of glass. But glass was not my concern. I wanted to see something related to my work. I will try to pass on to the readers my curiosity for visiting the 'glass-country'.

Rightly guessed, I was visiting Belgium, located in Western Europe, known for its medieval towns, renaissance architecture and of course, famous for glass. But Belgium is also famous for a cattle breed known as Belgian Blue, also called White Blue, Blue White and so on.

It is a meat cow and weighs an average of 800 kilograms, five times more than our Bangladeshi breed. The bulls may go up to 1,100 to 1,250 kilograms.

I rode from port city Ghent to reach the calm and beautiful municipality of Avelgem, located in the Belgian province of West Flanders, to see something they call the monster. My friends working for CID Lines (supplier of hygiene solutions) took me into the stunning nature of Avelgem.

A white blue cow farmer named Gerth was there to welcome me. I went right into the farm and saw the seventh wonder of my life, the Belgian Blue.

The cattle breed originated in the central and upper Belgium. The real breakthrough came in the 1960s with the development of the great double muscling characteristics. As a consequence of adept selection, the Belgian local breed, as we know it today, was born.

It is a large animal with prominent muscles; its back is absolutely straight and has strong legs. Despite such a large stature, it is a little afraid of people. The breed is known for its quiet nature.

In three years, its weight can go up to 750 kilograms. All of Gerth's calves in the farm are caesarean. A cow can go through this procedure six times in a life cycle. A one-day calf weighs up to 65 kilograms and drinks five litres of powder milk. Right before artificial insemination (AI), they weigh around 350 to 450 kilograms.

There are private organisations that deliver the quality frozen semen. Gerth says, after three months, the calves are given nutrients and grains -- that is why they keep on growing steadily and fast. During my visit to the Netherlands last year, I saw that Wageningen University has quite the same facility and research for ensuring quality cattle feed for their perfect growth. A farm named De Marke is working on cattle feed and rearing under the university there. It is almost the same as in China's Shandong province that I witnessed earlier this year.

"It apparently seems antibiotics were used for the growth, but in reality, it is not," says Robin Franzon, daily technical support officer, working at the CID Lines. "It happens due to mutation of the myostatin gene."

The huge muscles of the breed are known as 'double muscling'. It outclasses all other breeds. Extensive research shows pure Belgian Blues bear two types of myostatin genes.

Eid-ul-Azha is just around the corner for us. According to the livestock department of our country, we have more than 44 lakh cows ready for slaughtering, while there are around 7.5 lakh goats and sheep as well. Still, we see cows coming in from our neighbouring country. We still depend on others for cow meat.

As a modern breed, Belgian Blue is exceptional for short gestation periods, structure and mobility, high food efficiency for fattening, facility for cross-breeding calving, unique muscles, and also ease of calving. These cattle are sturdy and do well in most climates. It can stay strong in chilly winter to hot and humid temperatures.

Just a reminder, to increase meat production in our country, the livestock department began rearing the American beef cattle 'Brahman' during 2008-10. Rearing is being carried out in 80 upazilas at the farm level. The result seems to be optimistic.

On an average, we get 200 kilograms of meat from a cow. It varies from 60 kilograms to a maximum of 360 kilograms. Meanwhile, the Belgian Blue can produce a minimum of 800 kilograms. This surpasses all other varieties.

So, we can say this breed can easily meet the demand for meat, if it is introduced in Bangladesh. The livestock department can also compare the results of this variety with 'Brahman' and keep the best for future.

If we can ensure that the breed reaches the farm level, we could easily meet local demand and there will certainly be a drastic change in our country. With the right intervention of research and field level technology, we surely can achieve this. That is what I firmly believe in.

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A farmer is showing the Belgian Blue breed at his farm in Avelgem, Belgium.

UAE introduces much-awaited bankruptcy law

AFP, *Dubai*

The government of the United Arab Emirates has approved a final draft of a much-awaited bankruptcy law that it hopes will strengthen confidence in the regional business hub.

"The law contributes in strengthening the financial, economic and legislative system in the UAE," said finance minister Sheikh Hamdan bin Rashid al-Maktoum in a statement received Monday by AFP.

The move puts in place a "separate and modern law to avoid bankruptcy cases, including financial restructuring, composition procedures, restructuring debts and liquidation funds," he said.

"Companies and individuals are now able to restructure their debt while avoiding bankruptcy liquidation," he added.

The law will end the practice of sending people to jail for bounced cheques until a restructuring plan for business owners has been agreed with creditors, reported The National daily citing an unnamed government official.

It said a number of small business owners have fled the country over the past two years in fear of being jailed for defaulting on debt and other financial obligations.

China eases quota restrictions for foreign institutional investors

Reuters

China's regulators on Monday issued revised rules on foreign institutional investments in the country's domestic securities using the yuan currency, another step forward in opening up its markets and encouraging more fund inflows.

Renminbi Qualified Foreign Institutional Investors (RQFII) will be given quotas no greater than a certain proportion of their asset sizes after registration with the State Administration of Foreign Exchange (SAFE), the regulator said on its website.

If the desired investment quota surpasses the base quota, investors will need to gain approval from SAFE.

Foreign sovereign funds, central banks and monetary authorities are not restricted by asset size and can obtain quotas based on their investment needs.

The rules were jointly issued with the People's Bank of China (PBOC).

Individual RQFIIs needed to previously seek approval from SAFE for any quota to buy stocks and bonds in China and the amount of quota was given on a case by case basis.

Britain's May faces obstacles to post-EU trade goals

REUTERS

Britain's Prime Minister Theresa May listens to the speech of China's President Xi Jinping during the opening ceremony of the G20 Summit in China on Sunday.

AFP, *Hangzhou, China*

NEW British leader Theresa May sought to start shaping her country's post-EU access to world markets on Monday, but faced a Japanese warning over the fallout from Brexit and the US saying it was not its first priority.

In the wake of its vote to leave the European Union, Britain must renegotiate its access to world markets, an issue currently handled by Brussels.

It is a huge task for the world's fifth biggest economy.

May met Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull on the sidelines of a G20 summit in China, saying that Australia had "already been engaged in discussions with you about what the free trade agreements may look like", following Britain's EU exit.

That could upset European leaders, after EU commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker said he opposes trade talks between Britain and other economies while it remains part of the European Union.

"I don't like the idea that member states of the EU, including those who are still a member state of the European Union, are negotiating free trade agreements," he said on Sunday.

Such discussions were an "exclusive matter" for the European Union on behalf of its members and "we are sticking to it", he told reporters.

According to EU officials, formal negotiations with Brussels itself cannot start until London triggers Article 50, the treaty provision governing its up to two-year-long departure from the grouping.

The uncertainty is weighing on businesses and investors, and when May met her Japanese counterpart Shinzo Abe on the sidelines of the summit he asked for her ensure the environment for Japanese companies remained as "transparent and predictable as possible", a Japanese official told AFP.

The comments came after Tokyo delivered a strong warning about Brexit.

More than 1,000 Japanese companies do business in Britain, employing some 140,000 local people, many of them lured by the access the country offered to the EU and its single market of hundreds of millions of consumers.

Some of Japan's best-known companies, including Toyota, Hitachi and investment bank Nomura, were re-assessing their investments after the shock referendum result in June, the government said.

"We strongly request that the UK will consider this fact seriously and respond in a responsible manner to minimise any harmful effects on these businesses," it added.

Japan's direct investment in the country has topped 10 trillion yen ($96 billion) to date.

Australia will help Britain conduct trade talks, Turnbull said Sunday, as London has not had to hammer out its own deals since joining the EU and lacks experienced negotiators.

Britain maintains a close relationship with its resource-rich former colony, and May said she was grateful for Turnbull's offer of trade discussions.

Saudis tighten their belts for Eid in age of austerity

Reuters, *Riyadh/Khobar, Saudi Arabia*

A cartoon widely circulated in Saudi Arabia on Twitter last month showed three old men in traditional robes, named Unemployment, Prices and Poverty, looking down at a young boy with torn clothes named Salary.

"When will you grow bigger like us?!" the men ask the boy.

The annual Eid al-Adha holiday period is traditionally a time for ordinary Saudis to splurge on new clothes, accessories and travel. But this year's Eid holidays, which fall on Sept. 12-15, are set to be the most austere in well over a decade.

Low oil prices are forcing the government of the world's top oil exporter into spending cuts to curb a budget deficit that totalled a record $98 billion last year.

Those cuts, which began late in 2015, are now rippling through almost every area of the Saudi economy, reducing consumers' disposable income and weighing on the living standards of ordinary Saudis.

"Looking at individual consumption, you will find a significant shift in consumer habits, and the size of purchases has gone down significantly compared to last year," said Saudi economist Fadl Albuainain. "Although corporations are the main reason behind declining consumer demand, the impact of individuals' spending cannot be overlooked."

The consumer spending slump has become a significant drag on the economy as a whole. Saudi Arabia's non-oil sector shrank 0.7 percent from a year ago in the first quarter of 2016, its worst performance in at least five years. Second-quarter data has not been released yet but London-based Capital Economics estimates the sector shrank 4.5 percent in June.

The value of imports into Saudi Arabia plunged 24 percent from a year earlier in June; while some of the drop may be due to reduced purchases of equipment for government projects, some appears due to weaker imports of consumer goods.

The official unemployment rate among Saudi citizens is around 11.5 percent. So far, relatively few have lost their jobs because of this year's slowdown; legal restrictions make firing Saudis difficult, so the kingdom's population of 10 million foreign workers has borne the brunt of lay-offs.

However, government ministries and state-owned firms, who employ about two-thirds of working Saudis, are adopting a more frugal approach to their staff.

Lavish bonuses, overtime payments and other benefits - once considered routine perks in the state sector - have been slashed. Essam al-Zamel, another Saudi economist, said such benefits accounted for up to 30 percent of Saudis' take-home income, so many people now felt significantly poorer.

Meanwhile, the government has raised domestic gasoline and utility prices to save money on state subsidies, almost doubling the annual inflation rate to around 4 percent.

Although Riyadh is encouraging Saudis to establish private businesses to reduce the economy's dependence on oil revenues, the economic slowdown is making this harder by cutting the incomes of some entrepreneurs.

"I used to travel three times a year to Dubai and Europe, but this year I didn't and I am not going anywhere this Eid...I cannot afford it anymore," said Sultan al-Dossary, 27, a Saudi who runs a small enterprise helping firms interact with the government.

He said his net income had fallen to around 3,000 riyals ($800) per month from 10,000 to 12,000 six months ago. He plans to sell one of his three cars to shore up his finances.

The impact of such belt-tightening can be seen in shopping centres and restaurants in Riyadh, Jeddah and oil-producing Eastern Province. Glitzy malls display signs such as "70 percent Sale", "Further Reduction" and "Clearance"; many restaurants offer cut-price lunch packages.

Jarir Marketing Co, one of the biggest retailers in the kingdom, reported a 25 percent year-on-year drop in net profit for the first half of 2016 as sales fell 15 percent.

The slide in retail consumer purchases at Jarir's stores has been in the high single digits, while the cut in corporate and government spending on office and computer supplies has been even steeper, Jarir's chairman Muhammad Alagil told Reuters.

There are reasons to think consumer spending may soon stop falling. Corporate surveys in the past two months suggest private sector growth is picking up somewhat on the back of rising oil output, and many people expect modestly higher oil prices next year, which could ease pressure on state finances.

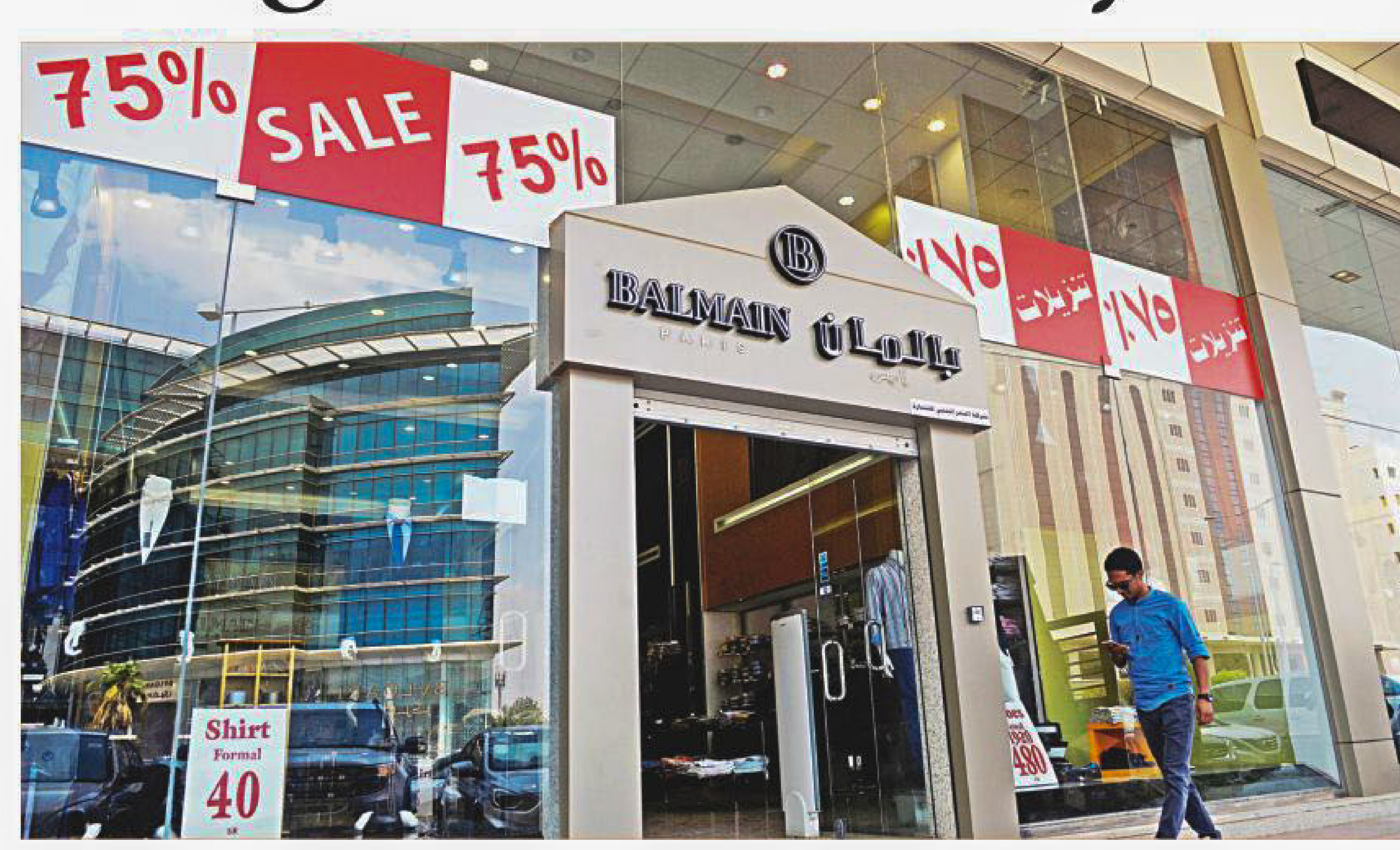
"We believe it will stabilise next year," said Alagil.

But few expect any major rebound. Even with austerity, Riyadh is expected to run a budget deficit in the tens of billions of dollars this year - unsustainable in the long run - and officials have said more subsidy cuts are in store.

In 2018, the government plans to introduce value-added tax, probably at a rate of 5 percent with exemptions for items such as food.

Many Saudis accept that low oil prices make austerity inevitable, and there is no sign of a significant political backlash against government policies. But belt-tightening is being widely discussed on Twitter under hash-tags such as "Salary doesn't meet our needs".

"We are nowhere near the bottom, and we think the years to come will be even more painful," said Samih Jarjoura, an operations manager who handles distribution of foreign luxury goods to retailers in Jeddah.



REUTERS

A man walks past a clothing store with sale signs, in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.