

# ADB-funded projects ensure safe water for hill people

SARWAR A CHOWDHURY, back from Bandarban

**S**AFE and drinkable water is more than a basic need for humans -- it saves life. But when a community in a remote and hilly area depends only on river for drinking water, life becomes a struggle for survival.

Boli Para, a village under Thanchi upazila of hill district Bandarban, is one such area where people have limited access to everything -- life is very challenging here.

Even till a month ago, the indigenous people of the village, which is about 400 kilometres southeast of the capital, were not getting safe drinking water. Though there were some wells set up by the local government, these did not work throughout the year.

People used to fetch water from the Sangu river, which is also a kilometre away from the village. But those days are gone.

They now have access to water safe for drinking from a natural spring connected through a three-kilometre pipe.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts Rural Development Project (CHTRDP)-2, a project financed by Asian Development Bank, set up two reservoir tanks that reserves water transported from the natural spring through the pipe, which was set up using the gravity flow system. "Prior to this, we were collecting water from the Sangu river. It took almost an hour to come and go from the river," said Popy Pro Marma, a housewife who lives in the village.

Now that water is available, they can devote more time to other household and income generating activities.

Another villager Promesing Marma said, "The incidence of water-borne diseases, especially diarrhoea, has marked a sharp decline."

Each reservoir tank has a capacity of 8,000 litres, said Jugesh Chandra Tanchangya, deputy director of the project. A unique feature is that the spring water falls in the reservoirs 24 hours, he added. The project benefits some 500 people of 97 marma families.

The Boli Para is one such sub-project under the CHTRDP-2, which was set up at a total cost of \$70.81 million. Of the amount, the ADB is lending \$55 million at a low interest rate.

The project is helping to reduce poverty by making social services and economic opportunities more accessible for the rural people, including the indigenous population and poor women, in three hill districts of the Chittagong Hill Tracts -- Bandarban, Khagrachari and Rangamati.

Chimbuk Pabla Headman Para of Bandarban sadar upazila is another sub-project where a 15-metre earthen dam was built to preserve water all year round.



Indigenous women at Lama upazila of Bandarban carry safe drinking water from a ring well, set up under a project financed by Asian Development Bank.

"Earlier, the water coming down from the hill could not be accumulated or used, despite a serious scarcity of water," said Rudro Murong, a villager.

A 75-metre stair has also been constructed. Beside the dam, a small reservoir has been installed to provide drinking water to the villagers and students at a hostel.

"The stairway is very useful for collecting water from the dam and the reservoir," said Murong. Earlier, they faced difficulties in collecting the water from the bottom of the hill.

The project also made it easier for the villagers at Tangoziri Para under Lama upazila of Bandarban to access drinking water, by setting up two ring wells.

Earlier, they used to collect water from the streams, springs or dug wells nearby. But these water sources either dry up or become turbid during the rainy season.

"We used to suffer from an acute water crisis and were compelled to drink contaminated water, resulting in diseases and poor health," said Janati Tripura, a mother of

two kids.

But the two ring wells at the bottom of the hill, which were set up two months back, now benefit around 300 indigenous people living there, she added.

A 110-metre stairway has also been constructed to help the villagers collect water from the wells easily.

"Earlier, our women had to climb up and down the muddy and slippery hills to collect water," said Astani Tripura, the community head.

The farmers in the village also got two power tillers under the project to plough their lands. Previously, they used conventional tools like ploughs and cows to cultivate their lands. But that was slow and time consuming.

"Now we can cultivate more land in less time, grow more food and other crops and have improved our conditions," said Sri Mohon Tripura, a 45-year-old farmer.

There are maintenance committees comprising local people who look after the establishments and infrastructure set up under the projects.

# Online sales jump on Black Friday

REUTERS

**U**S online sales surged on Black Friday, with Amazon.com Inc offering the steepest discounts among e-commerce sites as it set the agenda for what has traditionally been the biggest shopping day of the year for brick-and-mortar retailers.

In-store shopping began to pick up in the afternoon, but the increase in customer traffic paled in comparison to the jump in online sales, analysts said.

Macy's Inc website saw such heavy traffic that it had to delay customers from entering the site at three different times.

Online sales on Friday hit \$1.70 billion as of 3pm EDT, according to Adobe Digital Index, after reaching \$1.13 billion for the day on Thursday, up almost 14 percent from a year ago.

The National Retail Federation has said it expects total sales this holiday season to increase by 3.6 percent to \$655.8 billion, mainly due to the rise in online shopping.

This weekend's shopping could reflect signs of faster economic growth in the fourth quarter this year. Nationwide US retail sales rose 0.8 percent in October, driven by a 1.5 percent jump in receipts at online retailers.

The lowest unemployment rate in eight years of 4.9 percent in October and a rise in hourly wage rates of 2.8 percent for the year, the biggest increase since 2009, is fuelling consumer confidence and spending power.

"All of this adds up to the consumer feeling better about their current situation and I'm hoping they ... buy all of their gifts from Macy's," the retailer's chief executive officer, Terry Lundgren, told Reuters.

Administrative assistant Kelsey Gilford, 52, was shopping at Chicago's Water Tower mall on Friday but had already made purchases online on Thursday.

"I looked at some online deals on JC Penney which were good. I bought a small kitchen appliance yesterday," she said.

The deepest average discounts for Black Friday came from leading online retailer Amazon.com Inc, with an average of 42 percent off, compared with 33 percent off at Walmart, 35 percent at Target and 36 percent at Best Buy, according to e-commerce analytics firm Clavis Insight.

Amazon said Black Friday would surpass last year in terms of the number of items ordered on its website. The Seattle-based company declined to provide specifics.

Both Target and Wal-Mart, two of the country's biggest brick-and-mortar retailers, said Thanksgiving online sales were some of their best ever.

# Japan suffers longest consumer price fall since 2011

AFP, Tokyo

**J**APAN'S consumer prices fell in October, government data showed Friday, extending the longest string of declines in five years and underscoring its struggles to conquer deflation.

The weak inflation data -- core prices excluding fresh food fell 0.4 percent from a year ago -- come several weeks after Japan's central bank pushed back the timeline for hitting its 2.0 percent inflation target. The BoJ's target is a key part of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's faltering bid to pump up the world's number three economy.

The country has been struggling to reverse a deflationary spiral of falling prices and lacklustre growth but October's data mark eight straight months of declines -- the longest streak since 2011.

Bank of Japan (BoJ) governor Haruhiko Kuroda has pointed a finger at weak crude prices as the chief culprit behind the weakness. Japan's prime minister hand-picked Kuroda to help drive his "Abenomics" growth blitz of big spending, easy money and structural reforms, unveiled in early 2013.

The programme sharply weakened the yen -- fattening corporate profits -- and set off a stock market rally that spurred

hopes for the once-soaring economy.

But growth remains fragile while inflation is far below the BoJ's target.

Earlier this month, the central bank said it expected to hit two percent inflation by March 2019 -- four years later than its original target and the latest in a string of delays.

"What was supposed to be a quick two-year victory has transformed into a prolonged war of attrition that is set to drag on," Yasunari Ueno, chief market economist at Mizuho Securities, said in a commentary before Friday's data were published.

The bank's price goals would be "difficult to achieve," said Yasuhiro Takahashi, senior economist at Nomura Securities.

"I'd say prices will turn into positive territory eventually, but so far upward movement of prices... is still weak," he said. "The reason behind the slow pace of price rises is because the economic recovery is very slow."

The BoJ hoped that consumers would spend more if prices were rising, persuading firms to expand operations and getting the economy humming. But wage growth has fallen below expectations, meaning workers have less money to spend. Abe's promises to cut through red tape -- the key third plank of Abenomics -- have also been slow in coming.



A woman looks at items outside a store at a shopping district in Tokyo.

# Indian cash crunch hits gold demand during peak wedding season

REUTERS, Mumbai/Bengaluru

**M**UMBAI resident Shashikant Zhalte's wedding this weekend will be less sparkling than his family had hoped, thanks to a cash shortage following Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's shock withdrawal of high-value notes to fight "black money".

Zhalte bought gold jewellery for his wife-to-be months ago, but had delayed purchases for his mother and sisters.

Then came the Modi bombshell on Nov. 8, in the middle of the wedding season when gold demand spikes, forcing Zhalte to drop his plans to buy an additional 50 gms, worth around \$2,200.

The scenario is being played out across India, the world's second biggest consumer of gold, where it is customary to gift jewellery in marriages.

The wedding season stretches from September to April, and Thomson Reuters-owned metals consultancy GFMS says it accounts for more than half of the country's annual demand for gold.

More than two-thirds of that demand of around 800 tonnes a year comes from the countryside, where farmers are struggling to get enough cash to buy seeds and fertilisers in the sowing season. Penetration of credit or debit cards and money apps is very low in rural India.

The resulting drop in incomes and tepid buying in the wedding season means gold imports, which spiked in the immediate aftermath of the banknote announcement amid panic buying, are likely to drop sharply in the coming months, said traders in India and in the supply hubs of Dubai and Hong Kong.

"Instead of shopping, we were busy visiting banks and government offices to prove that there is a wedding in the family," said Rahul Ahire, a cousin of Zhalte.

The Indian government has put strict limits on the amount of money people can withdraw from banks, although a larger sum, 250,000 rupees (\$3,600), is allowed for weddings, as long as participants can prove that the marriage is genuine.

Gold demand from India is not a major factor in global prices, but has historically provided support when the international market is falling.

Gold is trading at its lowest levels in nearly 10 months in anticipation of a US interest rate hike in December. Higher US rates would boost the dollar and increase the opportunity cost of



A woman tries on a gold bracelet at a jewellery showroom in the eastern Indian city of Siliguri.

holding the metal.

A senior official with a Hong Kong bank, which caters mainly to Indian and Chinese gold buyers, said that it was worrying that the slowdown in Indian buying was overlapping with an expected rate hike by the US Federal reserve next month.

"In the past, physical Indian demand gave support whenever there was a sharp fall in global prices," said the official. "Without Indian buying, prices could fall steeply."

Surendra Mehta, secretary of the India Bullion and Jewellers Association, said imports would be "negligible" in December and January, but did not give any numbers.

Traders said that a year ago India bought 182.2 tonnes in those two months, a figure that could fall to 60 to 70 tonnes this time around.

"Retail demand is very weak and since prices are falling, jewellers are not willing to build inventory," Mehta said. "They are postponing purchases."

Another factor that could hit imports is a plan reportedly being considered by the government to impose curbs on domestic holdings of gold. A third of India's gold demand is paid for by unaccounted money.

The scrapping of 500 and 1,000 rupee banknotes, or 86 percent of the value of cash in circulation, is part of a crackdown on corruption, tax evasion and militant financing.

But brokerage Ambit Capital says the decision could pull down economic growth, which was 7.6 percent last year, by as much as 4.1 percentage points in the year to March 2017.

"It wasn't possible to change the wedding date at the last moment, so I curtailed spending," says Dashrath Jagtap, whose daughter got married this week in a small village in the western state of Maharashtra.

Most Indian weddings are held on days considered auspicious in the Hindu calendar. Between Nov. 8 and end-December, there are 15 such days, or nearly a quarter of the total in 2016, making the note ban particularly painful for service industries that rely on weddings.

"There is a huge drop in the wedding demand as many people don't have the new currency," said Chirag Thakkar, a director at gold wholesaler Amrapali Group in the western city of Ahmedabad.

"It could be more than 50 percent (on a) year-on-year basis. Most people used to purchase in cash and now they are confused whether to buy gold or spend on something else."

A wholesale trader in Dubai said demand will continue to be weak until people feel comfortable with their cash levels. The government expects the cancelled notes to be replaced in a few months, but some experts say it could take up to a year.