



TAMING CORONAVIRUS RAMPAGE

Homegrown ventilator goes on clinical testing next week

Walton to manufacture the critical respiratory machines

MUHAMMAD ZAHIDUL ISLAM

The Military Institute of Science and Technology (MIST), an engineering university run by the Bangladesh Armed Forces, has designed a ventilator, in the most positive development for the nation panicking from the coronavirus pandemic.

Ventilators blow oxygen into the lungs of patients suffering from severe pulmonary stress and are essential for saving the lives of the sickest COVID-19 patients. And Bangladesh, a nation of more than 16 crore, has only 1,250 ventilators.

MIST has received the certification of the design of the ventilator from a body of the World Health Organisation and is scheduled to go for a clinical testing from April 4 at the Combined Military Hospital in Dhaka.

Syed Mahfuzur Rahman, head of biomedical engineering department of MIST, shared the development during a virtual press conference organised by Zunaid Ahmed Palak, state minister for the ICT division.

In another development, Bangladesh yesterday received the patent, design and source code of the PB 560 model ventilator of Medtronic, a global medical device manufacturer, Palak said.

The government plans to go for local manufacturing of the highly technical medical equipment that are desperately in short supply worldwide.

MIST will go for stimulation from today, Rahman told The Daily Star after the media briefing.

"We are maintaining very close contact with the ICU department of the CMH and after completion of the simulation we will go for clinical testing."

And if any suggestion comes from the ICU team, those will be accommodated before applying to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

MIST informed the DGHS about the development. The state agency has assured the university of all kinds of support to expedite approval from local and international bodies, he added.

Local technology company Walton is also maintaining contact with MIST. If the ventilator design gets approval, Walton will start manufacturing it.

"We have already suggested Walton to started to work on hardware assembling and it is doing its part," Rahman added.

Meanwhile, ICT Division will sit today with the research and development team of Medtronic's Hyderabad office. Interested local technology companies will also attend the meeting, Palak said.

"We are not sure how long it will take to develop



ventilators in the country, but once the first device is manufactured, the process will be easier and bulk manufacturing will begin."

It might take a few weeks to complete the whole process and the price will be much lower than the imported ones, he said.

In order to manufacture, Medtronic's technological support will be required at least for the first batch of products as it will not be easy for the local talent to produce them by only just following the source code and design.

Walton has showed interest in manufacturing the Medtronic ventilators, too. Some other local technology companies are also keen to join in the effort, Palak added.

If the local technology companies can manufacture the device, its price will be within Tk 2 lakh, said an official of the ICT Division.

It costs at least Tk 7 lakh if the device is imported from China and Tk 18 lakh to Tk 20 lakh if it comes from Europe.

Walton is ready to go for the manufacturing of the device and would be happy to produce it for local patients, said Liakat Ali, chief executive officer of the group's computer division, while attending the video-conferencing.

Even if Bangladesh does not get the expected success from the initiative, it will give a huge boost to the country's technological sector and help them do better in the coming days, said Anir Chowdhury, policy adviser of the Access to Information (a2i) project under the ICT Division.

Medtronic is sharing design specifications for a basic ventilator model with any company that wants to help produce them for hospitals racing to treat coronavirus patients.

The Dublin-based company on Monday posted specifications for its PB 560 ventilator "to enable participants across industries to evaluate options for rapid ventilator manufacturing to help doctors and patients dealing with COVID-19".

Software and other information for the compact model, on the market since 2010 and sold in 35 countries, will also be added for download soon, Medtronic said.

American electric vehicle and clean energy company Tesla has taken up on this opportunity: it would be manufacturing the model in its solar panel production facility.



Social Islami Bank hands over medical equipment to Regent Hospital in Uttara for protecting the healthcare personnel treating COVID-19 patients. Md. Sirajul Hoque, the bank's deputy managing director, handed over the items to Md. Mizanur Rahman, MD of Regent Hospital.



An almost deserted Shapla Square in Motijheel yesterday. The outsize sculpture near the centre of Dhaka typically sees hubbub of activities in normal times.

FIROZ AHMED

Govt needs to do more for SMEs, domestic industries

AKM ZAMIR UDDIN

There is no question that the export-oriented sectors, particularly garment, have been dealt a cruel blow by the global coronavirus pandemic. Which is why, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on March 25 have rolled out a Tk 5,000 crore stimulus package for them.

But there is a vast swathe of domestic industries and small- and medium-sized enterprises that has been hit, arguably, just as hard. But they remain criminally neglected thus far.

An assistance of sorts was offered to them on March 19, when the Bangladesh Bank (BB) asked banks not to consider borrowers as defaulters if they fail to repay instalments until June 30 this year.

But, their accounts will still continue accrue interest during

the period, so this begs the question: could this move from BB be of genuine help to them?

When economic activities have been close to standstill for a good one month now and with no signs of things getting back to normal in the near future, is it rational to assume that they would be able to service the loan accounts complete with the accrued interest in two months' time?

Banks are unable to waive the interest payment for entrepreneurs as they now face a wide range of financial problems of their own due to the ongoing crisis, said Syed Mahbubur Rahman, managing director of Mutual Trust Bank.

"But, it is undeniable that the SMEs will have to be protected from the economic fallout in the interest of the country's GDP growth."

One way the government can help them in this dark hour

by offering to pay their interest amount, said Rahman, also an immediate past chairman of the Association of Bankers, Bangladesh a forum of managing directors of banks.

"It must only be the regular, upright borrowers who are given this relief -- the habitual defaulters must be left out of this facility, come what may," he added.

Salehuddin Ahmed, a former governor of the central bank, recommended outsourcing the task of separating the good borrowers and entrepreneurs from the bad ones to banks.

"The government should address the issue promptly, or else a large number of local manufacturers will be forced to wrap up their businesses," he added.

Banks do not have any strength to waive the interest as they have to provide interest to depositors

as well, said Ahsan H Mansur, executive director of the Policy Research Institute.

The lenders are now burdened with the financial packages declared by the government.

For instance, lenders will not be allowed to realise any instalment from borrowers until June but that has put pressure on their funds.

Besides, the central bank asked mobile financial services not to impose any charge on deposits amounting to Tk 1,000 per day, as a result of which the vendors are losing money.

"The government should be providing funds to banks and MFS vendors. The other countries have also followed the model," said Mansur, also the chairman of Brac Bank.

The authority concern has yet to take any genuine rescue measures: the buck has been passed on to

the banks and the MFS players.

"And regrettably, the government has not taken any measure to shield the small entrepreneurs, when they are the one of the driving forces of the economy."

The SMEs generate employment and keeps the economic growth rolling in, said Mansur, also a former official of the International Monetary Fund.

Rahman, Mansur and Ahmed went on to urge the central bank to form a special refinance schemes for the SME sector such that they can get loans at a discounted rate than the existing market rate for a soft landing to this drop in economic activities.

As of September last year, banks and non-bank financial institutions gave out Tk 205,491 crore to SMEs, which is about 20 per cent of their total outstanding loans, according to data from the central bank.

Flower industry wilting

SOHEL PARVEZ

If you happen to be in the southwest village Godkhali or its neighbourhood Panisara, you will find there is no dearth of colours from the stretches of rose, tuberose, marigold, gerbera and gladiolus gardens.

But the blooming beauties are now being discarded -- instead of being cherished.

The demand for flowers has screeched to a halt amid the ongoing countrywide shutdown to prevent the spread of the deadly coronavirus that has claimed upwards of 38,000 lives thus far globally, including five in Bangladesh.

The usual scenes of cascading garlands of flowers, busy florists and salesmen attending to flower lovers in the capital's Shahbagh area have been absent since March 26, when the government's movement control order took effect.

"We could sell even during hartals and violent political unrests. But we have never witnessed such a situation," said Md Rafiqul Islam, who has grown gerbera, gladiolus and tuberose on his 6-bigha of land.

The flower industry is only one of the many across the country facing daunting prospects as the Bangladeshi and world economies stagnate because of the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic.

"It is a highly uncertain situation. Only his Almighty

knows what awaits us ahead," said the 50-year farmer, who has been plucking flowers to protect the plants from pests and disease and to ensure good yields.

On average, Islam cut 2,000 sticks of gerbera daily and threw them away last week. Those would have fetched him Tk 5,000 a day.

Being a perishable item and not easy to preserve, the country's 20,000 flower farmers, including Islam, and traders, are staring at ruins.

Every day, blooms worth Tk 1.5 crore were written off since March 20, according to Babul Proshad, president of Dhaka Ful Baboshaye Kalyan Samity, an association of flower traders.

Flower cultivation first began in Bangladesh in the 80s in Panisara of Jashore district. From there, it spilled over to other districts.

Today, flowers are grown on 2,200-2300 hectares in Bangladesh, according to the Department of Agricultural Extension.

Farmers mainly cultivate nine types of flowers, including marigold, gladiolus, tuberose, rose, gerbera and chrysanthemum.

The actual data on market size is not available and guesstimates of stakeholders vary between Tk 200 crore and Tk 1,500 crore annually.

The pandemic and the accompanying economic woes came at a particularly bad time for the flower industry.



Spring is a busy time of year for florists, and they depend on the revenue coming in from Valentine's Day, national days such as the International Mother Language Day on February 21 and Independence Day on March 26 and the first day of the Bangla calendar year, Pahela Boishakh, on April 14.

"Now, all of us will be in big trouble as there will be no celebrations for Pahela Boishakh," said Fazlur Rahman, a flower farmer in Kaliganj of the western district Jhenaidaha.

Flower cultivation and trade is the main livelihoods for many farmers in Jashore, Chuadanga and Jhenaidaha districts and they will lose the mental and financial capacity to continue cultivation, according to Md Abdur Rahim, president of the Bangladesh Flower Society (BFS).

In the face of closure, Afsar Uddin, who grows flowers in Dhaka's outskirts Savar, furloughed two of his permanent workers.

"There is no other way," he said, adding that he is considering giving the workers nominal wages.

Rahim urged the government to provide support to flower growers.

"Agricultural produce like fruits and vegetables are being sold. But we are shut as flowers are considered non-essential items. The government should provide low-cost loans for us to survive."