

STOCKS	
DSEX Closed	CSCX Closed

COMMODITIES	
Gold \$1,742.50 (per ounce)	Oil \$27.67 (per barrel)

ASIAN MARKETS			
MUMBAI ▲ 1.13% 30,722.95	TOKYO ▼ 1.33% 19,290.20	SINGAPORE ▲ 0.45% 2,617.35	SHANGHAI ▲ 0.31% 2,819.94

CURRENCIES				
\$ USD	€ EUR	£ GBP	¥ CNY	STANDARD CHARTERED BANK
BUY TK 83.95	90.28	103.86	11.71	
SELL TK 84.95	94.08	107.66	12.31	



# BUSINESS

DHAKA FRIDAY APRIL 17, 2020, BAISHAKH 4, 1427 BS • starbusiness@thedadlystar.net



## TAMING CORONAVIRUS RAMPAGE

# Govt in great pickle over next fiscal year's budget

REJAU KARIM BYRON and MD FAZLUR RAHMAN

Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal plans to unveil the national budget for next fiscal year on June 11 amid deepening uncertainties brought on by the deadly coronavirus.

Earlier this week, he proposed two dates to the prime minister for presenting the budget for fiscal 2020-21. The premier chose June 11 over June 4.

The finance minister has also kept the coronavirus situation in mind as he prepares the budget for the next fiscal year. The final decision about the size of the budget, targets and modes would be taken in the first week of May.

Although the whole country has been on lockdown since March 25 owing to the rising cases of the novel virus, the finance ministry's budget formulation team has been working to prepare it in June.

The core teams of the budget formulation committee are going to the office as usual.

Kamal discussed alternatives with the prime minister if the pandemic makes the



RASHED SHUMON

situation in Bangladesh even more complex.

One of the alternatives might be to unveil a temporary budget for three months in line with a provision of the constitution. Alternatively, a temporary budget for two months may be presented under the presidential ordinance.

During the period of the temporary budget, the finance ministry would polish off the full fiscal year budget.

Last year, ahead of the polls, India had announced an interim budget.

Another option is to present the full-year budget and revise it after a quarter or so.

COVID-19, which has brought the economy to its knees, is not the only cause for concern for the finance minister.

Deficits and public borrowings were

already on the rise for the past year-and-a-half amid sluggish revenue generation before coronavirus hit.

The size of the national budget was initially planned at more than Tk 600,000 crore, in keeping with the growth seen in the last decade.

But it may be Tk 580,000 crore in the end, which would still be an increase of about 11 per cent from the amount earmarked for fiscal 2019-20.

With revenue receipt growth remaining sluggish, the government has to rethink the size of the next budget to keep the deficit within a tolerable level, said a finance ministry official.

Budget deficit is already set to be about 6 per cent of GDP this fiscal year, which is above the recommended 5 per cent, and it may go up to 7 per cent in fiscal 2020-21 because of increase in expenditure to counter the rampage of coronavirus and sluggish revenue generation.

Initially, the government had thought that the revenue generation by the National Board of Revenue (NBR) would face a collection shortfall of Tk 52,000 crore in the fiscal year ending on June 30. But now it seems the deficit may be Tk 100,000 crore.

However, the government is hopeful that the economic activities would get momentum in the next fiscal year. And the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has also given such signal.

On Tuesday, the crisis lender forecasted that the GDP would grow only by 2 per cent in 2020, but it would make a sharp recovery in 2021, reaching its highest-ever 9.5 per cent.

## Social distancing in garment factories out of the question

REFAYET ULLAH MIRDHA

Social distancing has proven to be one of the most effective ways to contain the spread of the lethal coronavirus but the safeguard remains largely elusive in Bangladesh's garment factories that employ about 4.1 million people.

Stakeholders blame it on three factors: most factories pay wages in cash for which workers have to gather in a place and form long queues; many garment units with dense seating arrangement are still open; and workers often take to the streets in droves demanding arrears.

As many as 76 per cent of the factories still pay wages in cash, 9 per cent via mobile financial services, 4 per cent through banks and 11 per cent through other means, according to a survey by the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA).

The BGMEA and the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) in a joint statement urged the factory owners to clear the wages of March as soon as possible.

Factory owners have also been asked to maintain social distancing among workers during salary disbursement.

A factory owner at Ashulia, an industrial belt on the outskirts of Dhaka, said he paid 70 per cent of his 12,000 workers in cash and the rest via MFS or bank accounts on April 9.

"I tried to enforce social distancing while disbursing salaries, but it's not always possible," he said asking not to be named.

So, he has already opened MFS accounts for all his workers so that he can pay them digitally from the next month.

The industrial police always try to ensure that workers maintain social distancing in the factories, said Md Farhad Hossain Khan, additional superintendent of police at the industrial police headquarters in Uttara.

"But the number of workers is so high that it's not always possible," he added.

As of yesterday, some 87 per cent of the garment workers were paid their salaries for March, according to the BGMEA, while BKMEA said 477 of their members out of the total 833 have cleared wages so far.

"Social distancing is hard to maintain in the garment sector as workers are coming to factories every day," said Nazma Akter, president of Sammilito Garment Sramik Federation, a platform for apparel sector workers.

She called upon factory owners and retailers to take a united stand to this end.

"We have requested every member of our association to pay wages as soon as possible, preferably by April 16," said BGMEA President Rubana Huq.

Though most factories pay salaries in cash, MFS would be a better option, she said, adding that they have requested the owners who are still paying in cash to help their workers maintain social distancing.

So far, 300 factories paid salaries for March through bank transfers or MFS accounts, said Shibnath Roy, inspector general of the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments, adding that social distancing is difficult to maintain in the labour-intensive factories.

## Nagad slashes transaction charge for SMEs

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Mobile financial service provider Nagad yesterday announced it slashed the transaction charge for small and medium-sized enterprises by about 59 per cent to Tk 6 for every 1,000 to mitigate their woes in the time of the coronavirus pandemic.

Nagad's registered customers for its Swadhin Merchant programme, which is dedicated to SMEs, would be able to perform business transactions with other merchants at the new rate, it said in a statement.

The move was made in response to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's call to stand by people in this hard time caused by the lethal pathogen, which has brought business activities across the country to a halt.

Nagad is owned by Bangladesh Post Office.

# Virtual healthcare, once a hard sell, can't keep up with demand now

MUHAMMAD ZAHIDUL ISLAM

Virtual healthcare service has gained traction in Bangladesh in the last few weeks as senior consultants and professors have put their private practice on hold while people are less inclined to visit hospitals and clinics to cut the risk of contracting the deadly coronavirus.

Patients are availing basic healthcare services by consulting doctors via video conferencing. Some senior professors are also trying to assess and treat patients using Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp.

Indian online health initiatives are also wooing local patients through digital channels against the backdrop of travel bans.

With the government declaring general holiday from March 26 to curb the spread of the coronavirus, healthcare-related digital platforms are getting a lot of hits.

Some platforms stated that calls had gone up four to five times compared with what was just a month back.

To support the growing demand of patients, a virtual hospital, HelloDoc, was launched on Tuesday, the first-of-its-kind in the country.

Patients can consult 42 senior consultants and professors through video channels, get tests carried out through visits of sample collectors and avail home deliveries of

lifesaving medicines.

Kotha, a local social and lifestyle mobile application, with digital platforms Amarlab and Ergo Ventures initiated the platform. The promoters say patients would be served free of cost as long as the pandemic persists.

Currently, there are about 15 digital healthcare service providers, according to the Access to Information (a2i), which is run under the Information Communication Division. The a2i is trying to coordinate among the platforms.

It has already promoted the platforms and is meeting up with them regularly. On Wednesday, there was also an online consultation among the entities.

"Definitely telemedicine or video conferencing could be the best solution in this situation when the COVID-19 is affecting the country," said Anir Chowdhury, senior policy adviser of the a2i. "And we are trying to promote that."

About 80 per cent of the medical services can be provided through video conferencing, said Aftab Hossain, chief executive officer of Olwel Digital Hospital, a Finland-based startup, which has been working in Bangladesh for three years.

Olwel was born to provide on-call doctors' support at the doorstep of patients. The

platform has gained a lot of popularity, he said.

It has rolled out video-conferencing support and there are 40 professors and senior consultants on its pool.

Currently, Olwel is organising about 20 video sessions per day and most of those connect with specialists.

"Lots of specialists have stopped visiting chambers and we are bridging consultants with patients through video calling."

In the process, doctors can stay home and Olwel is connecting them to patients through the internet.

The fee depends on consultants; it ranges from Tk 200 to Tk 600 per session. The fee includes Olwel calling back patients to check up on their conditions.

The on-demand healthcare solution provider will soon roll out a mobile application, which will also help them reduce technical challenges.

Olwel is planning to take some calls free of charge once the service goes live on the app by next week, Hossain added.

Praava Health, another big player in this sector, says the number of calls it receives has gone up fivefold since the shutdown was declared on March 26.

Now, it is receiving about 70 to 80 calls a day and more than half are about the coronavirus-

related issues, said Shakib Hadi, brand manager of the digital healthcare system.

Praava is also organising group calls for corporates where a good number of executives gather to have their queries answered by senior consultants. It has already run eight conference calls for different corporate houses.

It charges Tk 1,000 to Tk 1,200 for every video conversation with a specialist. Home sample collections are being charged Tk 1,000.

Through Praava's platform, customers can pre-book doctors for consultation by dialling the short code 10648, he added.

There are also some international players offering the services, such as MilVik and Tonic. Mobile operators earlier also provided healthcare support through digital platforms, which were accessible through short code 789.

Some platforms are organising live sessions on Facebook to address different issues and anyone can attend and ask questions.

However, of all of these initiatives, the government is handling most of the calls through the National Health Call Centre. Every day, it is receiving 80,000 to 90,000 calls and the service is completely free.

Local software firm Synesys IT has developed a platform and has provided 70.72 lakh services since its inception, of which 18.15 lakh were related to the coronavirus and were

delivered from March 8 to April 14.

The service was started in 2008 for mobile operators and later the government accepted it, said Rupayan Chowdhury, group CEO and co-founder of Synesys IT.

The average number of daily calls was hovering around 5,000 to 8,000 but it rose to 25,000 per day during the influx of chikungunya and dengue outbreak, which prompted them to increase capacity.

Another government initiative, 333, a national short code, handles a huge number of calls per day where a pool of doctors has been formed following the Uber model, meaning doctors connect with patients whenever they have time.

Some Facebook groups of doctors are also serving patients for free.

One of them is Dhaka College Friends '97, a group of students of Dhaka College who passed Higher Secondary Certificate exam in 1997.

A good number of students from the batch have become physicians and they are serving patients through Facebook Messenger and voice calls.

Pharmaceutical companies that have online presence and companies that collect samples for laboratory tests are also getting a lot of hits.

Pharmacy.com.bd is getting at least five times the number of regular hits, said Saiful Islam, the platform's head of sales.



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