

TAMING CORONAVIRUS RAMPAGE

Why can't the ride-hailing services ply the roads yet when everyone else can?

MAHMUDUL HASAN

After passing nervous two months thanks to the countrywide general shutdown, hitting the Dhaka streets again has become a compelling need for Md Belal Hossain, who drives a car under a ridesharing service.

But the partial reopening of the economy has not brought any good news for him as the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) has asked all ridesharing services to stay off the roads until further notice, although restrictions were eased for transport services and buses, minibuses, trains and domestic airlines have resumed operations.

"The decision is frustrating. If the operation does not resume soon, my family will starve," said Hossain, who mainly provides ride-hailing services by way of both Uber and Pathao.

His plight began at the beginning of March when the country reported the maiden cases of COVID-19. As the situation worsened, the government was compelled to enforce a shutdown, banning the movement of all public transport.

And with it went Hossain's source of livelihood.

Until the coronavirus reached the shores of Bangladesh, he used to drive a car by paying a monthly rental of Tk 22,000.

He has been with Uber since 2016 when the San Francisco-based American multinational ride-hailing company debuted in the country and has been taking home about Tk 18,000 a month on an average.

The income was enough for Hossain to rent a small flat in the capital's Mohammadpur for

his wife and two children at a monthly rent of Tk 5,000.

But, he has been unable to pay the rent for the last two months.

"Even on Saturday, the landlord paid a visit for the rent. I requested him to wait for a few more weeks as I had thought that ridesharing services would be operational again," he told The Daily Star over the phone in an emotional voice as if he was on the verge of tears.

If he can't pay the rent for June, he fears he might be evicted.

He has been buying daily essentials from a local grocery shop on credit assuring the shop owner, whom he knows for a long time, that he would repay when the situation returns to normalcy. He owes the grocer more than Tk 20,000.

"When I go the grocery to buy something, I cannot look at his eyes because I feel so ashamed. I went to every potential source to get some donation or food incentive, but I got nothing."

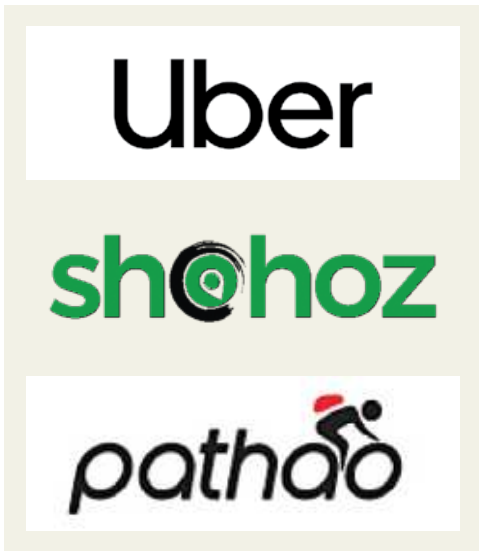
He submitted the photocopy of his national identification card to the office of the local ward councillor and visited it for a dozen times only to get rejected.

And neither Uber nor Pathao provided anything during this hardship. "I had thought at least Uber will do something for me as I have been with them for a long time."

CALLS FOR REOPENING GROWS LOUDER

On May 30, the BRTA sent a letter to 12 ridesharing service providers instructing them not to resume operation. The government agency did not explain why.

Drivers strongly protested the decision.



"While bus, train, CNG-run vehicles and minibuses are allowed to ply on the roads, the authorities put us in the red zone. But why?" said Md Kamrul Hossain, president of the Dhaka Ridesharing Drivers Union (DRDU), an organisation of app-based drivers representing around 5,000 members.

He urged the government to allow them to resume operations immediately as many families depend on their earnings.

"We are from lower-middle-income groups and we can't go outside for begging. The only solution is to allow us to drive again as it has already been allowed for everyone else."

The companies echoed the same. On June

1, Pathao and Uber jointly wrote a letter to the BRTA seeking permission to resume operations.

Ridesharing service, which is operated with the help of technology, is capable of providing the safest transportation to the public, the letter said.

OBHAI also wrote to the agency seeking approval to run the trial of its car and CNG-run vehicle services.

SAFETY CONCERNS

The main reason for not allowing the ridesharing companies to return to roads is safety concerns because of the highly contagious nature of the virus.

BRTA's Acting Chairman Yousub Ali Mollah recently told The Daily Star that they decided to halt the operations as most vehicles under ridesharing services are motorcycles and maintaining a social distance might be difficult for passengers and riders.

"If the situation changes, we will consider resuming this service."

However, the companies argue they are safer than any other mode of transport.

In the letter to the BRTA, Uber and Pathao said while mass transports like bus, train and subways are closed in many other countries, ridesharing service was allowed to continue as they were deemed safer.

As there is no restriction on cars and motorcycles, there will be an increase in offline trips that would pose a threat to safety and hygiene for both drivers and passengers, the companies said.

The companies are providing training to drivers through video tutorials and pictorials

so that they can make a safe journey during the crisis, according to the letter.

"The transport service we provide is the safest. We are far safer than the bus," Hossain said.

Uber said it has spearheaded the formation of a 'Transport Safety Alliance' in partnership with DBL Pharma, Zantrik, Dettol (Reckitt Benckiser) and Fresh Tissue.

The alliance will raise safety awareness amongst consumers and equip drivers with necessary health and safety supplies to ensure safer rides.

Uber and its allies will distribute key safety supplies such as masks, soaps, tissues and hand sanitisers to drivers from Zantrik's distribution points.

Reckitt Benckiser will provide Dettol soap bars free of charge and Fresh will distribute tissue papers, the ridesharing company said in an email to The Daily Star.

"As always, we will continue to invest in technology, safety protocols and will comply with all government guidelines to help keep everyone who uses the Uber platform safe," said Ratul Ghosh, head of East India and Bangladesh at Uber.

Pathao has consistently been taking necessary steps in making sure that safety is perfectly ensured in these times, said Sayeda Nabila Mahabub, director for marketing and public relations at the company.

It is providing facemasks, hand sanitisers, disinfectants and hand gloves to its drivers and will also provide regular health check-up facilities to customers.

READ MORE ON B3

Beximco Pharma bracing for remdesivir export to 30 countries

AHSAN HABIB

Beximco Pharmaceuticals seem to be going through a purple patch of late.

After grabbing headlines globally last month for being the first company to market remdesivir, the antiviral drug that has shown promise in treating COVID-19 patients, the local pharmaceutical company is now set to export the medicine to more than 30 countries this month.

"We are in talks and have made a lot of progress in some cases. We expect that we can export from this month," Rabbur Reza, chief operating officer of the company, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Without mentioning names of the countries, he said they have been approached by some Asian, African, Middle Eastern and European nations.

"We will export the medicine through our government and so we are receiving requests through their governments only," he said.

Though Beximco Pharmaceuticals' stocks plunged 2.8 per cent to Tk 68 on the Dhaka Stock Exchange yesterday, the price is far better than it was three months ago, according to

data of the premier bourse.

Market analysts said investors are optimistic about the company's performance as it has produced a drug like remdesivir to meet the growing demand of the local and international markets.

When most other listed companies suffered a massive drop in their prices amid the fallout of the pandemic, Beximco Pharmaceuticals was faring quite well, they said.

Some other local companies including Eskayef (SK-F), Incepta, Beacon, Healthcare and Square have also got the go-ahead to manufacture remdesivir, a drug developed by American biopharmaceutical company Gilead Sciences.

Eskayef began distributing its version of remdesivir, Remivir, last month.

The injection, which was previously developed to treat the Ebola virus but did not work, has come to the limelight as one of the most promising treatments for COVID-19 that has claimed 375,656 lives around the world so far.

Data from a trial by the National Institutes of Health in the US showed that remdesivir reduced hospitalisation stays



by 31 per cent compared to a placebo treatment, but did not significantly improve survival.

California-based Gilead has a patent on remdesivir, which means it has exclusive rights to make it. But, international trade rules allow nations defined by the United Nations as least developed countries, including Bangladesh, to ignore such patents and make drugs more affordable in their markets.

The United Nations-backed Medicines Patent Pool, which is helping Gilead find partners,

contacted Beximco asking if it was interested in the voluntary licencing for remdesivir, Reza was quoted as saying by Bloomberg.

Gilead has since licenced five companies including Cipla and Mylan NV in India and Ferozsons Laboratories in Pakistan to make generic versions of the drug and sell in 127 countries.

Meanwhile, on Sunday, Beximco Pharmaceuticals sent some remdesivir to Pakistan for three critically ill COVID-19 patients by a special cargo flight.

A spokesperson of Beximco said they sent 48 vials of Bemsivir, the brand name of remdesivir, on humanitarian grounds and at the request of the Pakistan high commission in Dhaka.

"Beximco was requested by official authorities to provide Bemsivir for a small group of critically ill patients against a special import permit issued by the Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan," he said.

Recently, a medicine manufacturer in Pakistan named Searle Pharma announced that it plans to import remdesivir from Bangladesh. The firm said it had entered into an exclusive licensing and marketing agreement with Bangladesh's Beximco Pharmaceuticals.

"Searle Pharma is planning to import remdesivir in finished form (ready-to-use) to meet the country's urgent requirements," the company told the Pakistan Stock Exchange recently.

Beximco Pharma, listed on the Alternate Investment Market (AIM) of London Stock Exchange, Norway's Norges Bank, the world's biggest sovereign fund, controls 3 per cent of Beximco, according to data compiled by Bloomberg.

Garment exports to major destinations nosedive

REFAYET ULLAH MIRDHA

Bangladesh's garment exports to major destinations suffered a devastating blow in April as factories put up the shutters while demand hit rock bottom because of the coronavirus pandemic worldwide.

Apparel shipment to the EU, Bangladesh's largest export market, was only \$220 million in April, while the average monthly earnings usually stand at nearly 1.5 billion, according to data from

Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA).

In July-April, Bangladesh exported garment items worth \$15.06 billion to the EU, which is 14.61 per cent lower than that in the same period last fiscal year.

Garment export to the US, the country's single largest export destination, amounted to only \$70 million in April, against the average monthly earnings of \$500 million in the usual times, the BGMEA data shows.

In July-April, the amount stood at \$4.44 billion, which is 12.64 per cent lower than the earnings in the same period last year.

Export also declined to the Canadian market: In April, Bangladesh exported garment items worth \$9.5 million. During July-April the amount reached \$746.35 million, a 21.64 per cent drop year-on-year.

"We foresee continued slowdown in exports till the end of this year," said BGMEA President Rubana Huq.

April and May have seen freefall in exports and based on the current discussions with the buyers, exporters would have to be skeptic in making a generalised prediction, she added.

"We may see exports plummeting by 30-40 per cent in upcoming months since retail markets are yet to pick up and the impact of COVID-19 on consumer behaviour is still unknown."

The sector is still facing many uncertainties, she added.

Benapole custom releases goods in record 19 minutes

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Benapole Custom House yesterday issued the release order and cleared a consignment of chilli, turmeric and ginger in just 19 minutes -- a new record for the port.

The customs duty paper was printed in 10 minutes and the release order in the next 9 minutes, said Belal Hossain Chowdhury, Benapole custom commissioner.

Some 42 railway wagons carried the 2,600 tonnes of spices, he said.

"The goods were released in the quickest possible time to prevent a potential crisis," Chowdhury added.

If the documents are correct, not only rail cargo, all types of consignments can be cleared quickly, said Naem Miron, a revenue officer of Benapole Customs House.

Rubel Enterprise from Bogura brought the products from India, according to import documents.

Importers have to pay parking fees and extortion charges if the products are carried through trucks, whereas rail cargoes are free of such matters, Chowdhury said.

One wagon can bring four trucks of goods at a time and a train of 100 bogies can bring about 400 trucks a day.

Moreover, the chances of false declaration in rail cargo remain low and the rent is less than half of trucks', he added.

Nivea teams up with e-commerce platforms to reach customers' doorsteps

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Global skincare brand Nivea has partnered with multiple e-commerce platforms in Bangladesh to make its wide portfolio of personal care products easily available to consumers through the touch of their fingertips as the coronavirus pandemic pushes people online.

Through the partnerships, the brand aims to cater to the growing needs of consumers by providing more accessibility of skincare products, including shower gels,

roll-ons and face washes, among others.

Its partners are Daraz, Chaldal, Shwapno, Shajgoj, Eorange, Shoparu, Ghore bazar, Meenaclick and Shop Up.

Nivea is a German personal care brand that specialises in body-care and is owned by Hamburg-based Beiersdorf Global AG.

"We have seen a growing demand even during this lockdown for our products. Hence it was only natural that we keep our supply chains moving to get closer to our consumers," said Sudhanshu Krishna,



associate director for international business at Nivea, in a statement yesterday.

Nivea is now reshaping delivery models for the sake of the consumers as it looks to provide greater convenience.

The service will be available for consumers in Dhaka and will soon expand to the cities in line with the expansion of the e-commerce companies. It will also offer multiple payment options for customers.

In Bangladesh, Nivea is represented by International Distribution Company.