

Pandemic takes the shine off port city's luxury hotels

Business drops 60pc as threat of a second wave looms large

MOHAMMAD SUMAN, Chattogram

Luxury hotels in Chattogram has seen a 60 per cent drop in business due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, according to industry insiders.

Hotel owners are struggling to remain optimistic amid the potential threat of a second wave of the virus in the upcoming winter, which could once again send the economy into a tailspin.

"If this situation continues, we will have no choice other than to close down," they said.

More than half of the rooms available at hotels in the port city remain vacant these days as most people prefer to stay at home to avoid being affected with the pathogen.

Besides, the number of business meetings, seminars and other programmes held at these venues has dropped to almost zero due to the government's instruction to avoid public gatherings.

There are six star-rated hotels in Chattogram -- the Radisson Blu Chattogram Bay View, Hotel Agrabad, The Peninsula Chittagong, Best Western Alliance, Well Park Residence and Hotel Saint Martin -- that have about 540 rooms between them.

"All our activities were on hold

between March and July due to the pandemic," Shakib Nowab Ali, director for human resources and admin of Hotel Agrabad, told The Daily Star.

During the pre-Covid period, 70 to 80 per cent of the hotels were booked on any given day. But soon after the outbreak began in March, the business shrank by more than 5 per cent.

Hotel Agrabad has about 400 employees, including 270 permanent staff members.

The tourism and hospitality sector suffered the most amid the ongoing pandemic but the government is yet to provide any significant support for the ailing industry.

"Considering the current situation, we asked the commerce ministry to waive advance tax, electricity bills and other charges but we are not getting any kind of cooperation from the authorities concerned," Ali said.

Despite having next to no revenue at the moment, Hotel Agrabad still spends more than Tk 1 crore on operational costs each month.

"If this situation continues, we will have no choice but to close the business," he added.

Since investors, buyers, sailors and many other business entities from numerous countries travel to Chattogram to enjoy its commercial

and port facilities, foreigners usually book 40 to 50 per cent of the hotels.

Now though, that number has come down to less than 10 per cent.

Ruhul Amin Babul, chairman of Best Western Alliance, told The Daily Star that on Monday, only eight of the 88 rooms available at his hotel were booked.

"We opened the hotel in February this year and had to close down at the end of March due to the pandemic," he said.

And although the hotel was re-launched in October, guests are yet to turn up in sufficient numbers.

"We started with 189 workers but we had to cut our manpower in half due to bad business," Babul added.

Similarly, the number of guests at Radisson Blu, the sole five-star hotel in Chattogram, The Peninsula, Well Park Residence and Hotel Saint Martin has dropped significantly.

Abdul Koium Chowdhury, executive member of the Bangladesh International Hotel Association, said the fear of Covid-19 has seriously harmed the tourism sector, leaving most hotels empty amid the pandemic.

"Most of these hotels are already concerned about paying the salaries and wages of their employees and staff," he added.



More than half of the rooms available at the hotels in the port city remain vacant these days. PHOTO: COLLECTED

Govt to build dried fish processing centre in Cox's Bazar

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The government is going to establish a dried fish processing centre in the southeastern coastal district of Cox's Bazar by spending nearly Tk 200 crore in order to facilitate increased production of the popular food for both local and export markets.

The Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (Ecne) yesterday gave its go-ahead to the plan, which also bears the objective of creating jobs for 4,600 fishing-dependent families.

Once established at Khurushkul area, the plant will have a 14,000-tonne annual production capacity alongside storage and marketing facilities for local and international markets, according to a brief of the Ecne meeting chaired by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

"This project will play a role in increasing

export earnings along with helping meeting demand for fish protein in the country," said the planning commission in its opinion.

The move comes amidst a gradual increase in the export of dried fish over the years.

In fiscal 2009-10 the export amount was 622 tonnes. The shipment figure rose to 2,339 tonnes in fiscal 2018-19, showed data from the Department of Fisheries.

Under the initiative, Bangladesh Fisheries Development Corporation (BFDC) will build a fish landing shed, a four-storied laboratory, an associated office, a training-focused dormitory and a cold storage of 100-tonne capacity.

The state agency will also establish 380 mechanical dryers, 350 of which will be of the greenhouse type, a packaging factory and 36 sales centres by December 2023. The project will begin from January 2021.

"Currently, fish are dried in an unhygienic manner in many areas. We will make dried fish in a hygienic manner in the processing industry," said Rashid Ahmed, director (finance) of the BFDC.

The Ecne also approved a Tk 2,500 crore project to establish a 400-kV Aminbazar-Maowa-Mongla Transmission Line.

It would conduct electricity from coal-fired power plants at Rampal and Payra in the southern districts and some of that from the Rooppur nuclear power plant in the northern district of Pabna.

The cost of the project was initially estimated to be Tk 1,356 crore. Now it has risen by 85 per cent as the route of the under-construction transmission line has changed while its length also increased.

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F-commerce start-ups should be made accountable: experts

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

With online businesses witnessing rapid growth, the registering process for f-commerce or Facebook-based businesses need to be monitored and made accountable so that consumers' rights are well protected, experts said at a webinar yesterday.

The meeting on "e-commerce and consumer rights in the time of Covid-19" was organised by the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI).

While f-commerce is flourishing, problems of the whole e-commerce sector of Bangladesh needs to be addressed to facilitate their success, said Ghulam Rahman, president of the Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB).

Along with the advancement of e-commerce, adequate rules and regulations should be in place, he said.

At present annual e-commerce sales in Bangladesh amounted to about \$2 billion and it is increasing at a rate of 50 per cent every year, said DCCI President Shams Mahmud.

Though everyday trade witnessed a reduction during the Covid-19 pandemic in the country, trade of e-commerce has increased remarkably, he said.

Protection of consumer rights is a key factor for a sustainable e-commerce ecosystem in Bangladesh, he said.

Quality, conformity, liability, distribution, secured payment system and price of products are very much linked with consumer rights, he said, recommending bringing the e-commerce sector under the government's stimulus package.

Covid-19 came as a blessing for e-commerce, said Commerce Secretary Jafar Uddin.

In spite of the dissatisfaction arising among consumers from time to time, the market of e-commerce, which includes f-commerce, is growing manifold for its spiralling demand, he said.

In order to utilise its huge potential, a "Digital Cell" has been established under the commerce ministry, he said.

An advisory committee is also working under World Trade Organization Cell of the ministry to ensure consumer-friendly eco-system of digital commerce, he said.

"Through the Digital Cell and e-support centre, we will be able to face the existing challenges of this sector," he added.

While F-commerce is flourishing, problems in the whole e-commerce sector need to be addressed, says Ghulam Rahman, president of the Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB)

In a keynote paper, Syed Almas Kabir, president of the Bangladesh Association of Software and Information Services (BASIS), highlighted that the number of internet users in Bangladesh had increased 5.9 per cent from that of last year.

When it came to the adoption of ICT, Bangladesh is ahead of India and Sri Lanka, he said.

There are 36 million active users of social media networks in Bangladesh and sales through f-commerce in Bangladesh amounted to Tk 312 crore, he said.

He further urged to bring f-commerce traders under a registration process so that they could be monitored, regulated and financed.

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LOCKSMITHS: THEN AND NOW



The all too common jingling of keys signalling the passing of locksmiths through neighbourhoods on sultry afternoons of the '80s and '90s has faded since long. They have been replaced by the whirring of Chinese machines in roadside shops that now make spares in a minute or two. The photos were taken at Karwan Bazar in the capital yesterday.

ANISUR RAHMAN

CSE rolls out promotion to attract bulk, foreign investment

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The Chittagong Stock Exchange (CSE) has rolled out a three-month promotional programme, under which foreign investments and bulk investments can be made free of charge.

"In order to encourage transactions through the bulk and foreign windows and increase the number of foreign portfolios in Bangladesh's capital market, the CSE declared this programme," the port city bourse said in a press release.

Bulk investment refers to trading through the CSE's bulk window with each trade being of at least Tk 5 lakh in value.

The promotional programme will be

continued from November this year to January of 2021, according to the press release.

During the promotional period, bulk and foreign trades will be free of charge. This means that the bourse's TREC-holders (trading right entitlement certificate holders) will not be charged commissions for trades executed in the bulk or foreign windows.

The new offer is a major business opportunity for TREC holders and is actually going to motivate them to augment the amount of bulk/foreign turnover in the CSE, it added.

The CSE began its journey on October 10, 1995 with the promise to create a state-of-the-art bourse in the country.