

Turning waste into wealth

Bogura weavers are producing yarn, warm clothes worth Tk 200 crore annually from waste fabric

MOSTAFA SHABUI, Bogura

Bogura, which has always been a district town known for centuries-old archaeological sites, is also home to around 10,000 families of weavers.

These weavers have been making a fortune for the last four decades out of a by-product of Bangladesh's multi-billion-dollar apparel sector – waste fabric or jhoot.

The artists at Adamdighi upazila in the district situated on the bank of the Karatoya river have dedicated their lives producing yarn and warm clothes since the British era.

They now produce different items like blanket, shawl, sweater, towel, socks, muffler, caps, neck warmers and bedsheets worth over Tk 200 crore every year.

The weavers mostly sell their produce at the Shaul Haat, a temporary bazar, which sits twice a week. Buyers from all parts of the country flock to the place in large numbers.

"Of the Tk 200 crore, 60 per cent comes from the sales of yarn," said Mofazzal Hossain, president of the Tontubahi Somobay Samity of the Haat.

There are around 1,200 small traders, and they sell products worth nearly Tk 3.5 crore a week, said Hossain, who is also the owner of Baraka Traders, which sells warm clothes worth Tk 1 crore a year.

"I buy waste fabric at Tk 10-20 per kg and rejected yarn at Tk 100-300 per kg," said Nazrul Islam, another trader of Shaul Haat.

"I collect those items from Dhaka's Mirpur-10 Jhoot Palli and sell them in my upazila. My annual sales figure hovers around Tk 1-2 crore."

In Shaul Bazar, there are over 1,500 local shopkeepers who separate yarn from garment waste and sell them to the weavers.

Nearly 1,500 traders are also there to collect warm clothes from the local manufacturers to sell to the buyers in different districts.

Md Duranta, a trader hailing from Tangail, told The Daily Star that he came to the bazar with six other traders to buy yarn.

"We will buy around seven tonnes of yarn and make shawl for women in



Clockwise from bottom left, Traders take a look at dyed yarn made from waste fabric. Weavers are processing yarn. A woman is making bundle of dyed yarn with the help of a spinning-wheel. Sellers are waiting for customers at the Shaul Haat. The pictures were taken from Adamdighi in Bogura last week.

Tangail. This bazar is our only source for this type of cotton-yarn at low prices."

"Last year we bought ready yarns at Tk 140-180 a kg, which has increased to Tk 210-300 a kg because of the coronavirus pandemic," said Hossain.

The Covid-19 epidemic has taken a heavy toll on the weavers, especially women, who play an important role in separating yarn from garment wastage.

Not a single product was sold in the

first two months of the countrywide shutdown the government imposed in March, Hossain said.

However, the pandemic could not stop the local weavers from producing quality products.

Nurul Amin, a shopkeeper who came from Narayanganj, said he is impressed with the quality and price of the shawls that are sold in the bazar.

"I usually buy 1,000-2,000 pieces of shawls every year from the bazar."

Some of the families of weavers



MOSTAFA SHABUI

Minister urges OIC member countries to implement preferential trade agreement

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Commerce Minister Tipu Munshi has urged the leaders of the member countries of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) to fully implement the preferential trade agreement to increase trade and business among the members.

The minister has also stressed the need for forming an emergency fund to develop the tourism sector of the OIC member countries.

Munshi made the call at the 36th session of a virtual meeting of the standing committee for economic and commercial cooperation of the Organisation of the Islamic Cooperation (COMCEC) from his official residence on Wednesday.

The COMCEC is the main multilateral economic and commercial cooperation platform of the Islamic world and it serves as a central forum to address the common development problems of the Islamic Ummah and provide solutions to them.

As one of the four standing committees of the OIC, COMCEC was established by the Third Islamic Summit Conference held

in Mecca/Taif, in 1981. The COMCEC has 57 member countries as well as 5 observer countries, which are spread over four continents.

The minister also invited the entrepreneurs of the OIC member countries to invest in Bangladesh.

He informed the meeting participants that Bangladesh has a very investment-friendly environment and the government has been developing 100 special economic zones across the country.

The minister in another event on "Facing the challenges of the fallout of Covid-19, stimulus package and recovery of the economy" said the economy has started recovering from the fallout of pandemic.

At the discussion organised by the finance ministry at Osmani Memorial Auditorium in Dhaka, the minister also said his government has already approved 21 stimulus packages involving Tk 1.22 lakh crore to help the economy recover fast.

The government has successfully ensured the smooth supply of basic commodities at fair prices to the consumers during the ongoing epidemic, the minister said.

Business rights or human rights? Swiss vote shines spotlight on companies

REUTERS, Zurich

A billboard of a runny-nosed, dour-faced girl framed by Glencore's sprawling zinc mine in Peru greets commuters at Zurich's main train station with an ominous slogan: "Water contaminated. Child poisoned. Commodities firm liable."

As the only large mining firm based in Switzerland, Glencore has become the unwilling poster child of a campaign to change the constitution so Swiss companies are liable at home for human rights abuses or environmental harm they cause abroad.

Voters will now choose in a referendum on Sunday between the new proposals and a milder government version that would force firms to step up checks on their overseas operations and supply chains but stops short of extending liability to Swiss courts.

In a campaign that has polarized the nation, the government and multinationals say the Responsible Business Initiative goes too far, while activists, religious groups and various political factions say Switzerland risks falling behind other countries in tackling progressive social and economic issues without it. Glencore for one says the accusations levelled against it by the campaign are misplaced, and wrong.

Since taking a majority stake in 2017 in the Cerro de Pasco mine pictured in the billboard, Glencore said it had done much to address concerns about pollution from the site which occurred before it took over. "It hurts us to see these accusations," Glencore Chief Executive Ivan Glasenberg told Swiss newspaper NZZ.

SwissHolding, which represents Swiss multinationals such as pharmaceutical giants Novartis and Roche, food company Nestle, and Glencore, says it is self-evident the issues raised by the initiative need to be addressed.

But it says the proposed measures could push up compliance costs and legal risks for companies to the point where they shun some parts of the world, potentially

leaving businesses in the hands of firms that may not take the same precautions.

"The worst that could happen would be that people like us who are at the forefront of sustainability ... are forced to move out of certain geographies because of a law that has a good purpose but is poorly executed," said Antoine de Saint-Affrique, chief executive of Swiss chocolate maker Barry Callebaut.

"You wouldn't solve the issue,

economically controlled by multinationals liable for their own damage, usually in foreign courts.

But for Florian Wettstein, a business ethics professor at the University of St. Gallen and co-organiser of the Responsible Business Initiative, it's also about Switzerland keeping up with global progress on sustainable business practices.

"Switzerland tends to fall more towards the bottom of the pack, not just in terms of human rights

major trading operation there.

Anneke Van Woudenberg, executive director of RAID, an NGO in London which exposes corporate wrongdoing, said the Swiss initiative could also have a preventive effect, by giving companies incentives to take more care.

RAID submitted a complaint to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in September against Glencore.

The complaint says a spill at an oilfield in Chad owned by PetroChad Mangara Ltd, a Glencore subsidiary, caused injuries and environmental damage. Glencore denies wrongdoing. Under the Swiss initiative, Glencore would have to show that it took all necessary measures to alleviate the spill and any harm caused, if a lawsuit were filed in Switzerland.

"That would be critical to any defence if Chadian citizens came forward claiming human rights harms," Van Woudenberg said.

Both sides have poured money into the campaign and leading Swiss newspaper Tages-Anzeiger has estimated it will be the most expensive voting campaign of all time in a country that holds more referendums than any other nation.

If the initiative is passed, large companies and those in high-risk businesses would have to check that activities throughout their supply chains complied with internationally recognised human rights and environmental standards. More critically, they would also be liable in Swiss courts if victims can show damage was caused by firms they control.

The initiative would be more progressive than similar rules in France as it places more burden on companies to show they took steps through their due diligence to avoid harm – rather than victims having to prove they didn't.

Denise Laufer, head of economics at SwissHolding, said its members work with up to 400,000 direct suppliers and a million downstream suppliers globally, and the initiative could increase compliance costs and legal risks by 20 per cent and 25 per cent respectively.



REUTERS

A banner reading: "Responsible Business Initiative - Yes on November 29" is seen beside a road near Stallikon, Switzerland on November 23.

you would make the issue bigger," he told reporters.

Home to some of the world's biggest companies and a major hub for finance and commodities trading, Switzerland has become one of the world's leading commercial centres thanks to its business-friendly laws, regulations and low taxes as well as its history of political neutrality and economic stability.

Yet with three days to go, polls suggest the companies and the government are losing the argument. A survey by Swiss broadcaster SRF showed 57 per cent of those polled backed the responsible business initiative over the government proposal.

The government says it supports the ethos of the initiative but that its version is in line with international standards as it leaves foreign subsidiaries and suppliers

but also on socially economically progressive issues. The train is going very fast and, without the initiative, we risk missing it once again," Wettstein told Reuters.

A European Union proposal could bring in even more stringent liability laws for companies in the bloc while countries such as France, Britain and Canada have already enacted laws targeting liability on all or some human rights in business concerns.

In Switzerland, the initiative could lead to sharper scrutiny of the country's commodities hub and the institutions that finance it, investors and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Switzerland and abroad told Reuters.

Besides Glencore, rival commodities traders Vitol, Gunvor and Mercuria all have head offices in Switzerland and Trafigra has a

UK cuts development aid budget

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Amid the global coronavirus pandemic that has slowed economies, the UK has announced a temporary reduction in overseas development aid from 0.7 per cent to 0.5 per cent of its gross national income.

The UK Chancellor of the Exchequer on Wednesday made the announcement, as part of the Spending Review, saying the seismic impact of the pandemic on the UK economy has forced the government to take tough but necessary decisions.

This includes the temporary reduction in the overall amount the UK spends on aid.

"We will return to 0.7 per cent when the fiscal situation allows," said Dominic Raab, secretary of state for foreign, commonwealth and development affairs, in a statement on Wednesday.

The UN has set that the world's richest countries will provide 0.7 per cent of their national income for the developing

countries.

As of now, only five countries have provided or exceeded the percentage of their official development assistance (ODA): Denmark (0.71 per cent), Luxembourg (1.05 per cent), Norway (1.02 per cent), Sweden (0.99 per cent) and the United Kingdom (0.70 per cent).

There are fears the ODA could go down as economies suffer from the disruptions of productions and supply chains caused by the pandemic.

In the statement, Raab said the UK government remains a leading aid donor spending 0.5 per cent of its national income.

"We will spend more than £10 billion next year to fight poverty, tackle climate change and improve global health."

"We will combine aid with diplomacy, focusing our efforts where the UK can make a world-leading difference ensuring the UK is a force for good across the globe."