

Early potato harvests bring joy to Nilphamari farmers



Farmers who harvested early in December will make a good profit in the current season, say agriculture officials.

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Nilphamari

An early potato harvest has brought fortune to the farmers in Nilphamari district as traders are paying exceptionally high prices for the kitchen staple amid increased demand in the country's major cities.

The prevailing situation is unlike past years, when farmers faced consecutive losses as previous stocks of potatoes ran out before they could restock during the harvest season starting in January, according to farmers.

Besides, there was a mad dash among consumers to stock up on potatoes in the March-May period last year, when the government imposed a two-month 'general holiday' starting on March 26 in a bid to curb the spread of Covid-19.

And this led to a shortage of potatoes, the farmers said.

February-March is the perfect harvest time for potatoes since they mature 90 days after sowing, said Habibur Rahman, the designated agriculture officer of Kishoreganj upazila.

"But the farmers who harvested early in December will profit, which is good since we work for the farmers' benefit," he added.

During a recent visit to various potato producing villages in the district, this correspondent found trucks bound for Dhaka's Karwan Bazar waiting to be loaded alongside the fields.

Aminur Rahman, a farmer of Putimari village, hired a group of day labourers to harvest the potatoes he cultivated on five bighas of land. Meanwhile, another group of workers were engaged in

weighing, packing and loading the tuber crop onto trucks.

The whole process was being done as swiftly as possible since the traders were in a hurry to reach the wholesale market in Dhaka before dawn.

"I started cultivating potatoes on the last day of October in 2020 and spent Tk 1.25 lakh as production cost to get 10,200 kilogrammes (kg) of potato after only 52 days," Rahman said.

"Now, traders asked me to sell the harvest for Tk 4.08 lakh at the rate of Tk 40 per kg and I agreed," he added.

Emdadul Islam, a farmer in Kundapukur village of Sadar upazila who cultivated potato on three bighas of land, said that selling the vegetable at Tk 40 per kg was an overwhelming benefit for producers as in previous years they

got just Tk 15-20 per kg.

Osman Gani, a farmer of Porakot village in Kishoreganj, said that he would be able to build a brick house by selling the potatoes he cultivated on ten bighas of land.

Officials of the local Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) said that farmers have already harvested potatoes from 4,000 hectares of the targeted 22,500 hectares to produce 5.90 lakh tonnes.

Obaidur Rahmam Mondol, deputy director of the DAE in Nilphamari, said potatoes that are harvested early cannot be preserved throughout the year as it is consumed instantly.

"But it will not hamper the production target as farmers can cultivate the tuber crop on the same land twice in the same season," Mondol added.

Myanmar shows interest to supply 1 lakh tonnes of rice

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Myanmar has shown interest to supply 100,000 tonnes of rice to Bangladesh under a state-to-state contract, according to a top official of the food ministry.

"We received a letter regarding Myanmar's interest to supply rice but are yet to start discussions," said Food Secretary Mosammat Nazmanara Khanum.

"We want to give priority to India when it comes to buying rice since Myanmar supplies raw rice that is mainly consumed in the Sylhet area," she added.

Last week, the government's purchase committee approved a proposal from the Directorate of Food to import 2.50 lakh tonnes of rice, including 1.50 lakh tonnes of grains from India under a state-to-state contract.

The food ministry is also considering increasing the amount of rice to be purchased from India and officials from both countries are expected to hold discussions in this regard by the end of the week, Khanum said.

Although she did not share the proposed purchase amount, the food secretary informed that the price of rice is lower in

India than it is in Myanmar.

The government has memorandums of understanding with four countries -- India, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam -- regarding the purchase of rice through a state-to-state arrangement.

"We will import from Myanmar if needed," Khanum added.

The developments come at a time when the food ministry has also allowed private firms to import the staple grain in order to increase domestic supply and contain the volatile prices seen at local markets from earlier this month.

Until yesterday, retail prices of the coarse grain stood at Tk 45-48 per kilogramme, up 43 per cent from a year ago, when it was Tk 30-35 per kg, data from the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh shows.

The government gave the nod to private firms to import another 1.41 lakh tonnes of rice on January 11.

With this permission, the private sector is allowed to import 8.16 lakh tonnes of rice in total.

And including the government's purchase target, the amount of imports by the public and private sectors stands at 11.66 lakh tonnes.

Govt mulls policies on reuse of edible oil

Says Food Safety Authority chief

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The government is working to introduce policies on the use of trans-fat and edible oil at restaurants to safeguard public health, said a senior official of the Bangladesh Food Safety Authority (BFSA).

"The policy will address the issues of proper use of edible oil and trans-fat content in food," said Md Abdul Kayowm Sarker, chairman of the BFSA.

He was speaking at a dialogue on "Policy of Developing Collection System for Used Cooking Oil in Bangladesh" on Monday. The Business Initiative Leading Development (BUILD) and Muenzer Bangla Private Ltd, a subsidiary of Muenzer Bioindustrie of Europe, organised the virtual dialogue, according to a press release.

As per the Food Safety Hygiene Regulation 2018, nobody can use any by-products of food preparation. Used cooking oil is a waste product, and it must not be applied for further use as it violates the regulation, Sarker said.

"In particular, we are interested in implementing the testing methods during our regular checks at restaurants and other food businesses to monitor the exact amount of used cooking oil," he said.

Sarker said the BFSA was keen to develop

a strategy for recycling used cooking oil so that the oil is used safely for further value-addition and safe waste disposal.

Manzur Morshed Ahmed, a member of the BFSA, said there were many health issues regarding the use of used cooking oil.

"On the other hand, used cooking oil can be used as value-added products taking environmental aspects into account. There should be a guideline for collecting used cooking oil and developing a clear strategy for collecting it."

BUILD CEO Ferdous Ara Begum, who moderated the programme, underscored the need for initiating policy support for a formal collection system of used cooking oil.

Bangladesh imports more than three million tonnes of edible oil. But only a negligible portion is collected as used cooking oil mostly by informal actors, who sell them to restaurants, said the BUILD in the press release.

Latiful Bari, chief scientist of the Food Analysis & Research Centre for Advanced Research of Sciences, said reusing cooking oil increases the cholesterol, creates peroxides acid, causes cancer. Cooking oil with a high percentage of polar compounds is the prime cause for some of the worst diseases.

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GLOBAL BUSINESS

Coronavirus-spurred changes to global workforce to be permanent

REUTERS

Sweeping changes to the global labour market caused by the coronavirus pandemic will likely be permanent, policy makers said on Tuesday, as some industries collapse, others flourish and workers stay home.

"I think it would be a fallacy to think we will go back to where we were before," Philippines central bank Governor Benjamin Diokno told Reuters Next. "I think we have to have a vision of what the new normal will be."

The pandemic, which has so far infected at least 90.5 million people and killed around 1.9 worldwide, has up-ended industries and workers in almost every country in the world as tough lockdowns were imposed.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has estimated that the impact of huge job losses worldwide is creating a fiscal gap that threatens to increase inequality between richer and poorer countries.

The ILO estimated that global labour income declined by 10.7 per cent, or \$3.5 trillion, in the first three quarters of 2020, compared with the same period in 2019, excluding government income support.

India's Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar said the pandemic had created an "accidental challenge" under which the government delivered food on a regular basis to 800 million people and provided sustained business funds.

"We've created the beginnings



People wait in line for vaccination at Ashton Stadium in Bristol, Britain on January 11.

in a sense of a social welfare system," Jaishankar told Reuters Next.

Diokno said it was clear some industries will not survive, others will not be as dynamic as before, and yet others will be boosted by the massive changes.

"We were already geared towards the digital, contactless, industries," Diokno said.

"That will define the new normal," he added, saying he expects 70% of all adult Filipinos

to have access to a transactional bank account by 2023.

Australian Competition and Consumer Commission Chairman (ACCC) Rod Sims was pessimistic about the outlook for the aviation industry, seeing no return to usual international travel to and from Australia throughout 2021.

"I think free international travel between Australia and overseas will be a long time away, unfortunately," Sims told Reuters

Next.

The ACCC had produced an optimistic report on the aviation industry in early December when Australia appeared to have largely stamped out local transmission of COVID-19.

That situation changed almost overnight in late December when a worker at a quarantine hotel in Sydney for international arrivals tested positive, after moving freely among the public. Many state borders were quickly slammed

down and lockdowns reimposed over Christmas and New Year, while further curbs were placed on the few international arrivals allowed into the country.

"It reminds us how complicated it is to get rid of this virus, and how quickly it can grow," Sims said of the resurgence of the virus in Australia.

For individual workers, the pandemic has reshaped day-to-day working life, with tens of millions thrust into remote work.

A switch from a long commute on public transport to a short hop between rooms at home has been welcomed by many.

A global survey of more than 9,000 knowledge workers by Slack, published in October, found the vast majority would prefer a mix of remote and office work in future.

For businesses, that means they need to find alternative ways for their workers to remain connected, both for productivity and overall satisfaction.

"Organised sports, large conferences and conventions will not be around for the next 18 months," Diokno said.

Similarly, the need for a more nimble and innovative approach to education will remain long after the pandemic ends, said Helen Fulson, Chief Product Officer at educational publisher Twinkl.

"How many children today will be doing jobs that currently don't exist?" she said at Reuters Next on Monday. "We don't know how to train for these jobs."

EU 'regrets' new US tariffs, looks to Biden



REUTERS/FILE

US President-elect Joe Biden speaks at The Queen theater in Wilmington, Delaware.

AFP, Brussels

The EU regretted a new wave of US tariffs on French and German products that came into force on Tuesday and said it would seek a trade truce with the incoming Biden administration.

The tariffs are yet another chapter in a 16-year spat over subsidies for aircraft manufacturers Airbus and Boeing that turned increasingly sour under US President Donald Trump.

French exporters were hit with hiked tariffs on wine and cognac, while Germany saw new levies on aeronautic parts. "The Commission takes note of today's entry into force of US tariffs arising from the WTO Airbus case on aircraft subsidies," a statement said.

The EU executive handles trade matters for the bloc's 27 member states. "As we have made clear before, we regret that the United States chose to add further EU products to its retaliation list," it said.

The EU is "looking forward to engage constructively with the new US administration to resolve this long lasting dispute as part of a renewed transatlantic agenda", it added.

French wine and spirits exporters believe the new tariffs will cost the sector one billion euros in sales, with the cognac business especially punished. In its last days in office, the Trump administration is blowing hot and cold on trade issues with the Europeans.

Washington last week suspended a plan to impose new tariffs on \$1.3 billion in French products in a dispute over a digital services tax.