

# UN on lookout to build private sector partnerships

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The United Nations System has been seeking areas to build strategic partnerships with the private sector in Bangladesh, said Tuomo Poutiainen, country director of International Labour Organization (ILO), yesterday.

The UN System refers to the United Nations, its six principal organs such as the General Assembly and its various specialised agencies and affiliated organisations.

The UN System works closely with the government and private sector entities to enhance national capacities in supporting the national development agenda in line with internationally agreed principles and standards, said Poutiainen.

He also mentioned five strategic areas in which the ILO was focusing on: economic development, social protection, climate change, governance and gender protection.

The UN System is working to integrate coordinated and concrete engagement of the private sector to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and implementation of national development programmes, reads an FBCCI statement.

Poutiainen held a meeting with Sheikh Fazle Fahim, president of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI), on the latter's premises and discussed different issues.

Taking into account Bangladesh's overall

economic ecosystem, from micro small and medium enterprises to the largest industries, the FBCCI asked for technical supports from the UN System, especially in areas of industry and economic diversification, said Fahim.

He also sought cooperation on export competitiveness, product and market diversification, standardisation and certification, export strategy development, facilitation of women and young entrepreneurs, harmonisation, support for innovation, start-ups and their ecosystem, sustainability and inclusive growth.

The FBCCI president stressed cooperation and technical support from the UN System to develop a mechanism to quantify the investment of the private sector towards SDGs.

# EBL Insta Banking offers online account opening, retail services

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Eastern Bank has formally launched EBL INSTA BANKING, enabling Bangladeshi customers to open accounts online using their national identity cards and a selfie.

"This digital customer onboarding solution (will ensure) health safety and banking services maintaining social distancing during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic," said Managing Director and CEO Ali Reza Iftakhar in a statement.

Launched under Bangladesh Bank's e-know your customer (e-KYC) guideline, EBL INSTA BANKING uses "state-of-the-

art" facial recognition through a "Liveliness Testing" to ensure customers' security and privacy, the statement added.

An EBL Self-Service Portal on its website already enables opening fixed deposits and availing deposit pension schemes and retail banking facilities.

"With the addition of account opening facility and retail banking from home through EBL INSTA BANKING, customers now have access to the complete digital onboarding ecosystem," said the statement.

EBL INSTA BANKING is available at EBL Website, EBL DIA and EBL SKYBANKING app.



PREMIER BANK

M Reazul Karim, managing director of Premier Bank, opens Islami banking windows at six branches at Gulshan Avenue and Shyamoli in Dhaka, Rajshahi, Rangpur and Agrabad and OR Nizam Road in Chattogram through a digital platform.



ONE BANK

M Fakhru Alam, managing director of ONE Bank, opens a sub-branch at Mirpur in Dhaka recently.

# Apparel job uncertainty on the wane

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KM Abdus Salam, secretary to the Ministry of Labour and Employment, said Tk 50 crore was available with the ministry for disbursement through social safety net programmes among workers retrenched during the pandemic.

Some 10,000 workers have been listed so far as beneficiaries and each would get Tk 3,000, he said. The European Union and German government provided the fund as a donation.

The secretary also said the government would also make donations to the fund in the future and the ministry would stay open to donations from any other agency, body or country for workers to continue to get supports.

Rubana Huq, president of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), found parts of the study's findings to be a bit conflicting.

For instance, it stated that garment export earnings were declining but also factory managements setting higher production targets.

Moreover, the managements were said to be simultaneously hiring and firing workers, she said, urging to engage in conversion with data.

Huq also said between April and September,

prices of Bangladeshi garment items dropped 4.82 per cent although production costs continued to increase while demand declined 11 per cent in the US and 16 per cent in the EU.

However, the government has been putting pressure on garment manufacturers to start repaying the loans received through the state's stimulus package meant to offset the fallouts of Covid-19, she said.

Harry Verweij, ambassador of The Netherlands to Bangladesh, said his government played a pioneering role among the EU nations refraining from cancelling work orders.

He said The Netherlands and Denmark from the EU have particularly come forward to share the risk of buying garments during the pandemic. Amirul Haque Amin, president of the National Garment Workers Federation, suggested the government amend the current law centring laying off workers.

Many factories went for layoffs for four to five months on end although the labour law provisions allow just two months, Amin said.

Over two lakh workers lost their jobs during the pandemic, he said, adding that the scope for overtime has been reduced significantly because

of fewer work orders.

So only domestic solutions are not enough to solve the problems and a lot of global initiatives are needed for long-term solutions, he added.

Kalpona Akter, executive director of the Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity, said workers were provided 60 per cent of their salaries for now whereas it was difficult to survive even with the full amount.

She also urged the government to ensure continuation of the proposed 5 per cent annual salary increment.

Bangladeshi factory owners could not avail regional cooperation in sourcing raw materials during the pandemic, said Arshad Jamal Dipu, vice-president of the BGMEA.

So a stronger sub-regional cooperation is very important, he said.

Commerce Minister Tipu Munshi hinted that more time would be allowed for repaying the stimulus package loans.

He also sought greater cooperation among the government, retailers, factory owners, union leaders, workers and governments of countries sourcing the products for overcoming the sector's challenges.

# Vegetable growers left in the lurch

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Brinjal is retailing at Tk 20 per kg at retail markets.

Bakkar's cabbage was not spared either from the declining prices.

Azizul Islam, a vegetable grower in Chehelgazi village in Dinajpur Sadar upazila, sold each cabbage for Tk 3 apiece. The price was Tk 1.5 a couple of days ago, he said.

A cabbage is being sold at Tk 10 at the local kitchen market, down from Tk 25 two weeks ago.

Potato has also seen its fair share of the price drop at the farmers' level.

Each kilogramme of potato is being sold at Tk 9 at the farmers' level. In the local market in Dinajpur, traders were seen selling the popular vegetable at Tk 15 per kg.

The only vegetable that is bringing some smiles to farmers is green chillies.

Islam said a kilogram of green chilly was sold at Tk 80, which is higher than other winter vegetables. However, not many farmers grow green chillies, he said.

He went on to say that the government took measures when the price of potato was skyrocketing towards the end of last year.

"But we are not noticing any action from the government as the price of potato is falling. With this, the government is helping consumers, not the farmers," Islam said.

Onion growers are also disappointed after the government allowed imports when the locally produced variety hit the

market early January.

"The onion import could have been resumed after observing the market trend," Islam said. The best quality local onion is selling for Tk 35 per kg.

The government has been forced to allow traders to import onion after the price of the kitchen staple showed signs of heating up in the last quarter of 2020 following an Indian ban on exports in September.

A similar ban in September 2019 took the price of onion to its highest level as Bangladesh relies on imports for inadequate local supplies.

Golam Mostafa, an onion farmer in Biral upazila, said he sold each kilogramme of onion to traders from the field at Tk 23 recently. The rate was much higher last year.

Mahbub Islam, a vegetable grower in the Sadar upazila in Nilphamari, said he did not see any solution to overcome the losses incurred during winter. The situation is the same for other growers in the area.

"Potato seeds were expensive for the farmers last year," he added.

Khandakar Md Mezbahul Islam, an agricultural expert at the additional director Office of the Department of Agricultural Extension in Rangpur, said vegetable farming would be profitable if reasonable transportation was ensured for farmers.

He also blamed the middlemen for pocketing most profits.

"Farmers sell a kilogram of brinjal at Tk 3, but at the market, it is sold at Tk 20. Who is taking the rest Tk 17?" he questioned.

# 27,000 tonnes of imported onion lying at Ctg port

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Had Indian onions not arrived, importers could have made a profit even after paying the demurrage charges. Now, it is not possible as the price has dropped, importers say.

According to the Chattogram port sources, 27,000 tonnes of onions were imported from nine countries, including the Netherlands, Turkey, Thailand and Egypt, and those had been lying on the yards as of Thursday.

On average, 2,500 tonnes of onions were being delivered from the port every day before the Indian onions hit the market. Now, it has gone down to 500 tonnes.

Customs laws state that importers have to take the delivery of goods within 30 days after their arrival at the port. If they fail, the authorities will start the procedures to auction the goods. Around 1,100 tonnes of onion have been put up for auction. The onions were not delivered to importers for various reasons, said Faisal Bin Rahman, deputy commissioner for auction.

This is the single largest auction of onions. Another 900 tonnes of onions are being examined, and they will be auctioned soon, he said. Omar Farooq imported 72 tonnes of onions from the Netherlands in the middle of November. Although two months have passed, the importer has not taken the delivery.

"The demand for onions from other countries has declined as India has given the opportunity to export onions. Due to the convenience of the refrigerated container at the port, we take the delivery after the advance

sale," he said.

"However, due to the sudden fall in prices and the re-imposition of 5 per cent tariffs, the loss will increase if we take the delivery of these onions," he added.

On January 7, the National Board of Revenue re-imposed the 5 per cent customs duty on the import of the essential cooking ingredient. The duty was withdrawn in September to allow the importers to buy onions from international sources to boost supplies.

Mintu Sawdagar, a wholesaler of Chattogram's Khatunganj market and owner of Muhammadiya Traders, said the price of all onions, including the domestic ones, came down by Tk 20 per kg because of the imports from India. No one is interested in buying the onions that came from other countries. There is demand only for local and Indian onions as the quality of the former is not good, he said.

Local and Indian onions can be sold on a daily basis, whereas it takes up to a week to clear the varieties from other countries. Wholesalers are not storing the varieties from other countries because of the shortage of space in warehouses in Khatunganj.

Indian onions are being sold at Tk 40-42 per kg in the wholesale market, local onions at Tk 28-30, Egyptian onions at Tk 30-34, and Dutch onions at Tk 20-30 per kg in the kitchen market on Saturday, said Sawdagar.

Before the arrival of Indian onions, the onions from other countries were sold at Tk 40-45 per kg in the wholesale market, he added.

# SME Foundation to set up business incubation centres

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"In Bangladesh, the understanding about the SME business incubator or accelerator is still at a very nascent stage," said Huliya Tetik, a consultant on business incubation for the SME Development Project Phase-2 which is funded by Asian Development Bank (ADB).

The concept of entrepreneurship is well known but there is a need to raise awareness on the importance of entrepreneurship and SMEs for the regional and national economy, she added.

Tetik went on to say that there was passion, interest, available resources and innovative ideas in the country.

However, a roadmap, information sharing, leadership quality, trained people and connectivity are needed to forge an enabling environment that supports the start and growth of new SMEs, according to the workshop.

Revenue generation to sustain the BICs is one of the key challenges, Tetik said.

The draft strategy paper suggested establishing a national coordination committee comprising representatives from various ministries, including that of industries, finance and ICT and various universities, in order to set up and manage incubation centres throughout the country.

The panel will work to facilitate easy access to finance and tax benefits for entrepreneurs and to recognise those who become successful.

SME Foundation Chairperson Md Masudur Rahman said they would work to support entrepreneurs and implement the SME policy 2019.

SME Foundation Managing Director Md Mafizur Rahman moderated the session.

# Third Dano milk powder brand offers 'double the nutrients'

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The Scandinavian producer of dairy products operating in Bangladesh since 1961 also plans to address nutritional needs of adults with the new products.

Citing a study of British market research company Kantar, Mohammad said one out of every three milk consuming household in Bangladesh use products of the Dano brand.

He said over 1 crore people consume the Dano brands of milk powder every month.



UNITED LUBE OIL

Moinuddin Hasan Rashid, group chairman and managing director of United Group, attends a "Petronas Partners' Meet" organised by United Lube Oil. United Lube, a sister concern of United Group, is the sole distributor for Petronas Lubricants International in Bangladesh.

# Understanding food poverty and food vulnerability situation

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In this regard, preparing a digital database against NIDs with the help of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, local administration and other relevant ministries is essential.

Besides, against the backdrop of this pandemic, understanding food poverty and food vulnerability can be of particular importance for identifying and targeting households with different degrees of food consumption deficiency for the government's social safety net programs and Covid-19 incentive packages.

For example, for the chronic food poor and highly vulnerable households, cash in kind transfers in the short run to smoothen their consumption variability might be more appropriate.

On the other hand, strategies towards small-scale employment generation might be suitable for the transient poor and vulnerable non-poor households.

In addition, combating urban food poverty requires targeting the food poor at slum areas in particular and small-scale and targeted employment based safety net schemes could be introduced in such cases.

Given that the country has achieved food security and has made commendable progress in food production, the emphasis should therefore be towards equitable distribution, focusing particularly on the food vulnerable.

The author is a professor of economics at the University of Dhaka