

Sea tourism gets a boost Patuakhali farmers content with paddy prices

Karnafuly Ship Builders launches cruise ship on Ctg-Saint Martin's route

But concerned over govt decision to import 10 lakh tonnes of rice



KHONDOKER MD SHOYEB

The cruise ship MV Bay One is getting ready to set sail from Saint Martin's island to Chattogram.

KHONDOKER MD SHOYEB

Karnafuly Ship Builders launched a luxury cruise ship—MV Bay One—on January 14 for the travellers to go from Chattogram to Saint Martin's Island with ease.

The ship capable of carrying 2,000 people at a time started its inaugural journey from the port city's Patenga Water Bus Terminal with over 800 passengers.

"The 400-foot cruise ship is 55 feet wide and 5.4 metres in depth. It has an average speed of 16.1 nautical miles per hour," said MA Rashid, managing director of Karnafuly Ship Builders Ltd.

"However, the ship is equipped with state-of-the-art 11,200 brake horsepower main propulsion engine, which can help it to go as fast as 24 nautical miles per hour," he said.

Once, the ship used to travel to different destinations from Tokyo. The name of the vessel was changed from Salvia Maru to Cruise Ship Bay One when Karnafuly Ship Builders imported it from Japan.

The multi-floored ship built by Mitsubishi Heavy Industries in Japan's Kobe city reached Chattogram port on September 19 last year through Andaman sea and the Bay of Bengal.

The ship was brought in to travel between Cox's Bazar to Saint Martin's Island. But the company had to change the route and start its journey from Chattogram to the island due to lack of jetty facilities in Cox's Bazar.

Steps are now ongoing to build a jetty for the berthing of the ship at Darianagar in Cox's Bazar, the managing director of the company said.

"We are planning to add international routes soon, as our ship is registered with the International Maritime Organisation as a Star Class sea vessel."

The vessel run by a team of 167 crew members has a total of 2,000 seats of different categories, including presidential suites, bunk bed cabin, twin bed cabin and comfortable chairs.

Each return ticket in the ship from Chattogram to Saint Martin's Island

will range between Tk 3,000 to Tk 50,000.

The economy class seats will cost the travellers Tk 3,000 each and Tk 4,000 for business class seats.

Tk 50,000 will be charged if anyone wants to complete the journey occupying a cabin under the VVIP package. There is also a family package, under which the travellers can book special class bunkers for four at Tk 50,000.

The royal suites will cost Tk 45,000, presidential suites Tk 30,000 and single bunker beds Tk 10,000.

For one-way travels, both the VVIP and family packages seats will cost Tk 25,000 each while the royal suites Tk 20,000, presidential suites Tk 15,000 and single bunker beds Tk 7,500 each.

The ticket prices for economy and business class seats will be Tk 2,000 and Tk 2,500 each.

Primarily, the ship will start from Chattogram on every Thursday at 11pm from January 21 onwards and will leave Saint Martin's Island at 11am on every Saturday.

Aman paddy growers in Barishal's Patuakhali district are very pleased with current prices as each maund (about 37 kilogrammes) is fetching about Tk 400-500 more than that last year.

"Following a few years of losses, we are finally getting good prices," said farmer Md Zafar Hawlader of Lohanlaya village under Patuakhali sadar upazila.

The district's farmers had struggled to meet production expenses in the last couple of years due to poor prices prevailing in local markets, discouraging them from increasing their cultivation areas.

"Now though, our financial stability has improved," he added.

However, Hawlader is concerned about a government decision to import at least 10 lakh tonnes of rice from abroad this year in a bid to boost the country's food grain reserve amid the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

"The decision to import rice will likely reduce the market price and lead to losses," he said.

Echoing the same, Anwar Hossain Talukder, another farmer from the same village, said the government should consider the interest of local farmers when taking such decisions.

"Otherwise, the farmers will lose interest in cultivation in the face of gradual losses," Talukder added.

During a visit to the Dhankhali market in Kalapara upazila, this correspondent found local farmers measuring paddy on digital scales before filling those into sacks and piling those up by the road for sale.

Going round them were dozens of wholesale traders from different parts of the country seeking to make purchases.

In 2020, aman paddy sold at Tk 700 to 800 per maund even though the production cost was around Tk 800 per maund, according to farmer Abul Hossain of Dhankhali village.

"But now, the situation is very good as I can sell paddy at Tk 1,100-1,200 per maund," Hossain said.

"This year, I grew paddy on 6 acres



SOHRAB HOSSAIN

The district's farmers had struggled to meet production expenses in the last couple of years due to poor prices prevailing in local markets. The photos were taken from Dhankhali market in Kalapara upazila.

of land and earned about Tk 2 lakh from it," he added.

Farmer Abdul Mannan of the same village said he grew aman on 5 acres of land and was able to sell the paddy for Tk 1 lakh.

Besides, Mannan also had enough stock left over to feed his six-member family for the whole year.

Motaleb Khan, a farmer from Chandradwip village in Baufal upazila, said the current prices were very good and they would benefit if such rates prevailed throughout the year.

Wholesaler Abul Hashem from Kushtia said good prices were prevailing at the local markets since the very beginning of the year.

"Aman paddy was sold at Tk 700-Tk 800 last year but this year, we have to

buy paddy at Tk 1,100-Tk 1,200," he said.

Paddy bought from Patuakhali is supplied to rice mills in Kushtia and the finished product is then sold in different parts of the country, Hashem added.

Contacted, Hridayeshwar Dutta, deputy director of Patuakhali's Department of Agricultural Extension, said farmers were able to get what they had desired for this year. In the last couple of years, somewhat of a frustration had been prevailing among the farmers.

"But this time, that frustration is gone," he said, adding that aman paddy has been planted on 2.02 lakh acres of land in the district this year with a target to produce 4.37 lakh tonnes of rice.

NEWS In Brief

Europe auto sales post record fall

AFP, Paris

New car sales in Europe last year suffered a record fall of nearly 24 per cent due to the coronavirus pandemic, the European Automobile Manufacturers' Association (ACEA) said Tuesday.

"The EU passenger car market contracted by 23.7 per cent to 9.9 million vehicles as a direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic," the ACEA said in a statement. "Containment measures -- including full scale lockdowns and other restrictions throughout the year -- had an unprecedented impact on car sales across the European Union," it said. "2020 saw the biggest yearly drop in car demand since records began (in 1990)... all 27 EU markets recorded double-digit declines," it added.

The ACEA said that among the biggest auto markets, Spain recorded the sharpest fall at 32.3 per cent for the year, with Italy down 27.9 per cent and France 25.5 per cent.

IEA trims 2021 oil demand forecast

AFP, Paris

The International Energy Agency (IEA) trimmed its 2021 global oil demand forecast Tuesday as fresh coronavirus lockdowns cloud the outlook but said mass vaccination programmes should help bolster a second half rebound.

"Global oil demand is expected to recover by 5.5 million barrels per day (mbd) to 96.6 mbd in 2021, following an unprecedented collapse of 8.8 mbd in 2020," the IEA said in its latest monthly report.

"For now, a resurgence in Covid-19 cases is slowing the rebound but a widespread vaccination effort and an acceleration in economic activity is expected to spur stronger growth in the second half of the year," it said. "This recovery mainly reflects the impact of fiscal and monetary support packages as well as the effectiveness of steps to resolve the pandemic," it added.

The IEA said it now expected demand in the first quarter of this year to be 0.6 mbd less than previously forecast, with the full-year outcome revised down by 0.3 mbd. On the supply side, the IEA said that after "falling by a record 6.6 mbd in 2020, world oil supply is set to rise by over 1.0 mbd this year." "There may be scope for higher growth given our expectations for further improvement in demand," the IEA added.

It said that its forecasts assume that in the second half this year, Opec+ -- that is Opec members plus non-cartel producers, principally Russia -- will continue to rein in output, withholding 5.8 mbd of oil from the market in line with their April 2020 agreement.



GLOBAL BUSINESS

Pandemic reveals hidden poverty in wealthy Japan

AFP, Tokyo

Yuichiro welled up as he collected a food parcel at a Tokyo outreach event offering help to the growing number of Japanese pushed into poverty by the coronavirus pandemic.

"There is no work. Absolutely none," said the 46-year-old, until recently a construction worker, while clutching a small plastic bag of essentials on a cold winter street in the capital.

"This doesn't get reported much in the media, but many people are sleeping at train stations and in cardboard boxes.

Some are dying of hunger. "The world's third-largest economy has seen a relatively small coronavirus outbreak so far, with around 4,500 deaths and largely without the drastic lockdowns seen in other countries.

With an unemployment rate below three percent and a reputation for a strong social safety net, Japan also appears well placed to weather the pandemic's economic fallout.

But campaigners say the most vulnerable have still been hit hard, with statistics masking the high rate of underemployment and poorly paid temporary work. "The pandemic, rising joblessness and falling wages have directly hit the working poor, people who were barely getting by before," said Ren Ohnishi, who heads the Moyai Support Centre for Independent Living, an anti-poverty group.

Around 40 per cent of workers are in vulnerable "non-regular" jobs with lower wages and contracts that can be terminated easily.

Many also struggle to access welfare. Yuichiro, who did not give his last name to AFP, said he was sent from one government office to another before being told assistance was only for those



Volunteers and staff of non-profit organisation Tenohasi preparing food handouts for people in need at a park in the Ikebukuro district of Tokyo.

REUTERS/FILE

with children. "But there are lots of adults who aren't able to eat," he said.

More than 10 million people in Japan live on less than \$19,000 a year, while one in six lives in "relative poverty" on incomes less than half the national median.

Economists say that half a million Japanese lost their jobs in the past six months, and campaigners say the ripple effects are spreading across the population. "I know for certain the middle class is collapsing," said Kenji Seino, who heads the

non-profit relief group Tenohasi. Around 250 people were lined up in Tokyo's bustling Ikebukuro district to receive food, clothes, sleeping bags and medical help from Tenohasi's volunteer team, who also give free advice on job-hunting and government services.

"People who were already struggling were confronted with the coronavirus. They were on a tightrope and the rope just snapped," he added.

Experts warn the economic pain may be contributing to a rise in the suicide rate seen towards

the end of last year. A one percent point rise in Japan's unemployment rate translates into roughly 3,000 additional suicides a year, according to Taro Saito of the NLI Research Institute.

Women in particular are facing economic hardship because many work on temporary contracts in retail, restaurants and hotels -- all industries hit hard by the pandemic. Experts say women often hesitate to seek help or to join men in queues for food, but even so, they are now seeing more

women and mothers with small children at outreach events.

Seino said less than 20 percent of the people he helps are women, but he believes "many more" have not come forward.

"Some women feel that their children won't be able to walk with their heads high if they are on welfare," he added.

While statistics show rising applications for public assistance, Ohnishi of the Moyai Support Centre said the shame and stigma of being a welfare recipient made many reluctant to seek help.