

Hilsa traders, fishermen in hot water

They incur losses amid fresh restrictions; sales ahead of Pahela Baishakh not adequate, insiders say



DISTRICTS IN FOCUS

country's hilsa production takes place in and around Barishal.

"There is a huge demand for hilsa fish during Pahela Baishakh but fishing at six hilsa sanctuaries was halted between March 1 and April 30 this year," said Anisur Rahman Talukder, deputy director of the Department of Fisheries' Barishal office.

And so, the supply of hilsa decreased as there were no fishing activities in most catching areas, including Meghna river, Arial Kha, Bishkhali and Ilisha of Barishal division.

At the same time, supply fell due to the ongoing Jatka Conservation Week.

"But the demand remains high at this time of year, when hilsa is sold for more than double the normal price, Talukder added.

At least 500 tonnes of hilsa from Barishal's largest wholesale market and another 500 tonnes from the Patharghata, Bhola and Kuakata hilsa wholesale hubs are sent to the country's metropolitan cities ahead of Pahela Baishakh each year.

"This year though, no hilsa has been shipped," said Nirab Hossain Tutul, president of Barishal's Matsro Arotard Samity, a platform of fish wholesalers.

The total value of hilsa supplied to Dhaka and other major cities during this time of year is usually around Tk 10-20 crore.

READ MORE ON B3

New measures needed to offset second wave fallouts

OPINION



KHONDAKER GOLAM MOAZZEM

The second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic hit Bangladesh in early March this year -- almost exactly a year after the initial wave reached the country's shores.

The second wave has brought with it a completely new set of experiences, causing fresh disruptions in regards to the people's lives and livelihoods.

The first wave was all about fighting an unknown contagion and coping with livelihood challenges, which were previously left unattended.

In contrast, the second wave has attacked people more directly at a time when it

was largely perceived that the disease will not be 'unknown' and the livelihood challenges are likely to be solved.

But the fact is that the second wave has emerged as a set of new benchmarks for adversity on life in the country.

These benchmarks are -- (a) the disease will not be 'short-lived'; (b) the new variants of the virus are deadlier than the earlier ones; (c) the vaccine given is not effective against all variants and hence, (d) the people have realised that their livelihoods would need to continue along with the continuous attack of the coronavirus.

These new benchmarks need to be well understood and the ways to handle this new situation needs alternate approaches.

In January, the people were under the impression that the pandemic was over as the rate of infection had declined significantly after peaking on July 2, 2020, when it was 4,019 new patients per day.

READ MORE ON B3

More than 60 per cent of the country's hilsa production takes place in and around Barishal.

SUSHANTA GHOSH

Fishermen and fish traders have found themselves in hot water as the ongoing nationwide pandemic restrictions have hampered sales ahead of Pahela Baishakh, the first day of the Bangla calendar.

The demand for panta-ilish (a combination of rice soaked in water overnight and hilsa fried, steamed or in curry form) tends to soar on the occasion of Pahela

Baishakh, held on April 14, as it is traditionally enjoyed as a part of celebrations.

But in order to tame the recent surge in coronavirus cases across the country, the government announced a seven-day "lockdown" that began on Monday last week.

During this period, restrictions have been placed on public movement, transport and gatherings, making it difficult for people to visit their local markets

or prepare for the country's biggest cultural festival.

During a visit to a hilsa wholesale market, it was seen that most traders were passing idle times while others had closed up shop altogether.

According to data from the Department of Fisheries office in Barishal, hilsa production has increased to 5.5 lakh tonnes this year from 3.6 lakhs tonnes in 2020.

More than 60 per cent of the

STAR



STAR/FILE

To keep the economy open amid the pandemic, the government should introduce new health and safety protocols to save people from Covid-19 infections.

READ MORE ON B3

A supplier's plea to reopen clothing stores in West

REFAVET ULLAH MIRDHA

Chattogram-based Denim Expert's managing director, Mostafiz Uddin, has been sending an open letter to some leaders in Europe, the UK and the US since February 26 urging reopening clothing stores to ensure sustainable supply chains in garment business.



Mostafiz Uddin

"The continuing lockdowns...are killing the industry in Bangladesh, leading to hundreds of thousands of job losses, sharp rises in poverty and destitution for young women who rely on this industry as a lifeline," read the letter.

Literally hundreds of factories are shutting down and most may never come back to operation, he said.

Retailers and brands have kept stores closed since December to contain the second wave of Covid-19 infections.

Many European countries started reopening stores partially since March 14 with governments realising employees of consumer and supplying countries were losing jobs, said Uddin.

READ MORE ON B3

Ease stimulus conditions for SMEs

DCCI says in its budget proposals



STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The repayment period for loans from the stimulus package aimed at cottage, micro, small and medium enterprises (CMSMEs) should be extended by two years as those firms have been severely impacted by the pandemic, according to speakers at a virtual discussion.

In its budget proposal for fiscal 2021-22, the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI) yesterday demanded that the government ease the terms for the CMSMEs to avail stimulus funds.

The leading business chamber went on to suggest forming a national database of the CMSMEs across the country to ensure

transparency in disbursements.

Since firms in the sector face numerous difficulties when availing loans from the stimulus package, the DCCI also urged for the CMSMEs to be given funding with national identity cards being the only required document.

Economists, bankers, businesspeople and senior government officials at the discussion, organised by the DCCI, echoed the same.

"The government should consider mobile financial services (MFS) as a platform for disbursing loans for the CMSMEs as banks fear the risks," said Hossain Zillur Rahman, an economist and former adviser to a caretaker government. Besides, there is uncertainty over the country's economic recovery amid the recent upsurge of Covid-19 infections, he added.

Naser Ezaz Bijoy, chief executive officer of Standard Chartered

SUGGESTIONS FOR SMALL ENTERPRISES



- Allow two more years for stimulus loan repayment
- Ease terms, such as requiring only NIDs
- Disburse through MFS
- Form database
- Give 5-year tax holiday

Bangladesh, suggested easing the conditions and expanding access to credit guarantee schemes for the CMSMEs.

"We need to think about how to protect our very small and small entrepreneurs," said Md Fazlul Hoque, former president of the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association.

Hoque also asked the

government to enable import of all chemicals and equipment required for effluent treatment plants (ETPs) duty-free in the upcoming national budget.

"This would help factory owners feel encouraged to establish ETPs and thereby save the environment," he added.

Md Jasim Uddin, chairman of Bengal Commercial Bank,

suggested the introduction of a self-assessment facility and five-year tax holiday for the CMSMEs.

So far, around 68 per cent, or Tk 13,600 crore of the Tk 23,000 crore allocated for the CMSMEs, has been disbursed.

The rate of disbursement in the sector has been slow compared to other stimulus packages, said Masudur Rahman, chairman of SME Foundation.

"About 98 per cent of the fund for the export-oriented sectors has already been disbursed," he said, adding that workers employed by the CMSMEs have witnessed a 10 per cent reduction in wages over the past year.

The SME Foundation chairman also suggested reducing the taxes for light engineering sector, garment accessories and packaging, and motor vehicle spare parts manufacturing as these industries were growing.

READ MORE ON B3



GLOBAL BUSINESS

Amazon's win in union fight shows harsh realities facing labour movement

REUTERS

Amazon.com Inc's fierce resistance to unionization, skepticism among workers that organizing could get them a better deal and decisions on election parameters all contributed to the apparently lopsided defeat of a labor drive at the company's warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama, people close to the events said.

A vote by workers on whether to unionize failed on Friday by a more than 2-to-1 margin in a major win for the world's largest online retailer. The union plans to challenge the results based on Amazon's conduct during the election.

Union leaders had hoped the campaign just outside Birmingham would create Amazon's first organized workplace in the country and spark a new era of worker activism. Instead, it has illustrated the continued challenges facing the labor movement.

Officials at the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) argued that Amazon's unfair tactics were to blame in an election where only just over half of



REUTERS/FILE

A protester dressed as a nun holds a banner, as people protest in support of the unionising efforts of the Alabama Amazon workers, in Los Angeles, California.

eligible workers cast ballots.

In a statement, the RWDSU said, "The results of the election should be set aside because conduct by the employer created an atmosphere of confusion, coercion and/or fear of reprisals and thus interfered with the employees' freedom of choice."

Amazon in a blog post denied the outcome resulted from intimidation of its employees.

"We've always worked hard to listen to them, take their feedback, make continuous improvements, and invest heavily to offer great pay and benefits in a safe and inclusive

workplace," it said.

The e-commerce company campaigned for weeks, plastering the warehouse and even a bathroom stall with anti-union notices, stopping work for mandatory employee meetings on the election, and bombarding staff with text messages criticizing the RWDSU.

In one of the messages seen by Reuters, warehouse leadership warned that collective bargaining could result in workers losing benefits - something the union has disputed. "Everything is on the table," the text declared.

And in one of the mandatory meetings, presentations asserted union leaders used membership dues for improper purposes such as expensive cars and vacations, a former employee at the company's warehouse told Reuters. The union did not immediately comment on the claim.

But some warehouse workers pointed to shortcomings in the union drive. Many younger workers, lacking experience with unions and knowledge of labor history, were never persuaded of the benefits of organizing, these people said.

China fines Alibaba record \$2.75b for anti-monopoly violations

REUTERS, Shanghai/Hong Kong

China slapped a record 18 billion yuan (\$2.75 billion) fine on Alibaba Group Holding Ltd on Saturday, after an anti-monopoly probe found the e-commerce giant had abused its dominant market position for several years.

The fine, about 4 per cent of Alibaba's 2019 domestic revenues, comes amid a crackdown on technology conglomerates and indicates China's antitrust enforcement on internet platforms has entered a new era after years of laissez-faire approach. The Alibaba business empire has come under intense scrutiny in China since billionaire founder Jack Ma's stinging public criticism of the country's regulatory system in October.

A month later, authorities scuttled a planned \$37 billion IPO by Ant Group, Alibaba's internet finance arm, which was set to be the world's biggest ever. The State Administration for Market Regulation (SAMR) announced its antitrust probe into the company in December.

While the fine brings Alibaba a step closer to resolving its antitrust woes, Ant still needs to agree to a regulatory-driven revamp that is expected to sharply cut its valuations and rein in some of its free-wheeling businesses.

"This penalty will be viewed as a closure



Jack Ma, founder and executive chairman of China's Alibaba Group

to the anti-monopoly case for now by the market. It's indeed the highest profile anti-monopoly case in China," said Hong Hao, head of research BOCOM International in Hong Kong. "The market has been anticipating some sort of penalty for some time ... but people need to pay attention to the measures beyond the anti-monopoly investigation."

The SAMR said it had determined that Alibaba, which is listed in New York and Hong Kong, had been "abusing market dominance" since 2015 by preventing its merchants from using other online e-commerce platforms.