

Early pineapple harvest benefits farmers



Prices of pineapple are higher this year compared to the previous year due to high demand across the country, including the capital. The photo was taken from Sreemangal upazila of Moulvibazar recently.

AKANDA MUHAMMAD JAHID

An intense heatwave is sweeping across the country. The sun's piercing rays inevitably cause streams of sweat to run off pedestrians.

At this very moment, when sheer exhaustion leads to a desperate attempt at quenching one's thirst, a nonchalant roadside vendor offers his basketful of one of nature's simplest delights.

Yes, the season's saving grace is in the form of the sweet pineapple, to be precise, the popular "honey queen" variety.

Surrounded by a tough segmented skin and topped with a tuft of stiff leaves, this tropical fruit has now turned irresistible.

Scenes of people relishing on the aromatic yellow flesh, carelessly dripping juices all over, are surprisingly very common now on Dhaka streets.

Just as people are quenching their thirst, so has the advanced arrival of this fruit helped bring smiles to farmers during the days of the ongoing pandemic.

Though the peak time for harvest starts from late May or the first week of June, many farmers of Rangamati and Khagrachhari, and some of Moulvibazar have started picking it early to get a good price during Ramadan.

Harvesting has already started in Rangamati on a small scale since the middle of March, said

Krishna Prasad Mallik, deputy director of the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) in the district.

"We are getting on an average 24 tonnes of the fruit per hectare. This yield is comparatively good in this off-season. It will increase during the peak time," he said.

Kazi Lutful Bari, deputy director of the DAE in Moulvibazar, said usually harvesting starts there around May and June.

But considering the huge demand for this fruit during Ramadan, some farmers are harvesting a little in advance to get good prices, he added.

This year, the price is a bit higher compared to that last year due to high demand across the country, including the capital, during Ramadan and Covid-19 pandemic.

The retail price of four pieces ranges from Tk 120 to Tk 400 depending on the size and markets.

Vendors on rickshaw-vans in Dhaka city usually sell the smallest ones for Tk 30.

However, farmers are selling the fruit at wholesale markets in Rangamati anywhere between Tk 5 to Tk 50 based on the size variations.

Shamsul Haque, owner of a pineapple orchard at Radhanagar in Moulvibazar's Sreemangal, said the demand for pineapple has increased during Ramadan.

The retail price of four is around Tk 400 in the local market, albeit dependent on the size, he added.

Masudur Rahman, a private job holder in Mohammadpur of Dhaka, said he consumes pineapple during iftar every day as the fruit seemingly relieves fatigue and thirst after a whole day of fasting.

Suroj Mia, a security guard in Dhanmondi area, said though the price of pineapple was comparatively high this year, the fruit was still cheaper compared to other fruits in the market. "Therefore, I often buy pineapple for iftar," he said.

"I can't fast as I pull rickshaw all day. But in this intense heat, I eat pineapple usually to deal with my fatigue and quench my thirst," said rickshaw puller Ramjan Ali who was thronging with some others at a mobile shop on a rickshaw-van in Raja Bazar area recently.

Alongside Ramadan, the demand for pineapple is high during the Covid-19 pandemic as this fruit is considered a good option for dealing with colds and fevers, as it contains vitamins C, A, B6, E, and K, calcium, folate, iron and zinc, which help the immune system keep healthy.

Even before the season, the pineapples on the market are very sweet and tasty, said many customers.

PHOTO: MINTU DESHWARA

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Date sales moderate this Ramadan

MD ABU TALHA SARKER

Seasonal date traders in Dhaka have moderate sales of the most popular iftar item ahead of and during Ramadan as many city-dwellers left the capital because of the reinstatement of the strict coronavirus restrictions.

Like previous years, hundreds of thousands of makeshift and roadside shops selling dates have sprung up throughout the city, hoping there would be a spike in sales in the weeks preceding the fasting month and throughout Ramadan.

Some traders said business was good a week before the advent of Ramadan. They even saw good sales during the initial days of the fasting month.

They said it would be more profitable for them than any other month of the year if they could continue it for the rest of the month.

Rafiqul Islam Fahim, a retailer at Karwan Bazaar kitchen market, expressed satisfaction over date sales ahead of and during Ramadan. However, turnover was not as much as he expected because of the thin presence of customers.

"Sales will accelerate when customers come to the market. But because of the Covid-19 fears along with the government restrictions, there have not been large crowds. We have to accept the reality of the country and the world as well," he said on Tuesday.

Md Mominullah, a vendor in the same area, sells dates worth Tk 4,000-5,000 per day now, much lower than the pre-Covid

period.

"We have been able to keep our shop open while most of the businesses had to be shut during the restriction on movement. In that sense, we are lucky enough that we could manage our livelihood under the difficult circumstances."

In the first week of Ramadan, Mehmud Jardar, a seasonal date trader at Bihari Palli in Kalshi, Mirpur, said he made a good sale of dates a week before Ramadan began on April 14.

"I've earned higher than I had expected before the start of the holy month despite the latest restriction," he said.

After Covid-19 infections and deaths from the virus began rising alarmingly, the government enforced the lockdown-like control from April 5.

As the situation worsened, it went for a strict countrywide lockdown from April 14. The restriction was later extended thrice to May 5.

Shahinur Rahman runs a shop that sells biscuits on Kalshi road. He added a variety of dates to make some additional bucks prior to Ramadan that could help ease his debt burden.

Rahman, who incurred losses after the coronavirus hit the country in March last year, has borrowed from banks and local cooperatives to keep his business up and running.

His hopes to earn additional income were blasted when the government slapped the restriction to rein in the second wave of Covid-19.

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STAR

Like previous years, many makeshift and roadside shops have sprung up throughout the city to sell dates, hoping there would be a spike in sales.

Samsung profit jumps by nearly half

AFP, Seoul

South Korean tech giant Samsung Electronics posted a 46.3 per cent rise in first-quarter net profits on Thursday, largely driven by robust sales of its smartphones and home appliances due to continued stay-at-home demand.

The firm is the flagship subsidiary of the giant Samsung group, by far the largest of the family-controlled empires known as chaebols that dominate business in South Korea, the world's 12th-largest economy.

The conglomerate is crucial to the South's economic health -- its overall turnover is equivalent to a fifth of the national gross domestic product. Samsung Electronics said net profits rose 46.3 per cent in January to March from a year earlier to 7.11t won (\$6.4b). "Solid sales of smartphones and consumer electronics outweighed lower earnings from semiconductors and displays," the firm said in an earnings report.

The figures came a day after Samsung's controlling Lee family announced plans to pay more than \$10b in inheritance taxes following the death last year of chairman Lee Kun-hee -- one of the world's biggest-ever such settlements -- and donate a vast trove of art including works by Picasso and Monet.

The coronavirus has wreaked havoc with the world economy, with lockdowns and travel bans imposed around the globe for many months. But the pandemic -- which has killed more than two million people worldwide -- has also seen many tech companies boom, including Samsung.

Coronavirus-driven working from home has been boosting demand for devices powered by Samsung's chips, as well as home appliances such as TV and washing machines.

"Pent-up demand has led the growth in home appliances," said James Kang, a senior researcher at Euromonitor International. "But once the coronavirus situation

improves with the distribution of vaccines, the growth of home appliances will be slower than 2020 as people spend more time outdoors," he added.

Operating profit rose 45.4 per cent to 9.4t won, while sales were up 18.2 per cent to 65.4t won.

Analysts say the company has enjoyed a particular boost from rolling out its Galaxy S21 series in January, more than a month ahead of the flagship product's usual annual launch schedule.



AFP/FILE

This picture taken on April 28 shows a woman walking past an advertisement for the Samsung Galaxy S21 smartphone at an underground shopping area in Seoul.

"Samsung remains the largest vendor shipping 77m smartphones globally in the first quarter, growing 32 per cent year-on-year," said Neil Maston, executive director at Strategy Analytics.

"Samsung's newly launched more affordable A series 4G and 5G phones, and the earlier launched Galaxy S21 series combined drove solid performance in the quarter. "But this growth may be hampered in the second quarter in the face of a global chip shortage crisis and a decline in market demand due to the pandemic, said Jene Park, a researcher at Counterpoint Research.

"In the case of Samsung, its main components are being procured in-house, thus its production is expected to be relatively smooth compared to other companies," Park told AFP.

"However, Samsung's Q2 earnings will be adversely affected by the aftermath of Covid-19 in its major markets, such as India," he added.



GLOBAL BUSINESS

Biden launches audacious middle class spending package

AFP, Washington

President Joe Biden will unveil a nearly \$2t spending plan to boost the middle class Wednesday as the highlight of a sunny, yet audacious speech to Congress, signaling the Democrat's bid to reshape America.

Addressing a joint session of Congress on the eve of his 100th day in office, Biden will hail what on Tuesday he called "stunning" success in vaccinating Americans -- a national effort that has transformed the country from coronavirus catastrophe to leader in global recovery.

And with solid approval ratings and a Democratic congressional majority -- albeit razor thin -- Biden will seek to ride the momentum with announcement of a huge program to pour billions of dollars into education and childcare.

The spending spree, dubbed the American Families Plan, will be cast as a historic move to redress economic inequality and allow millions more Americans to join the middle class. To pay for it, Biden wants to reverse tax cuts for the rich that his Republican predecessor Donald Trump pushed through in 2017.



US President Joe Biden

"I think what you'll hear the president say tonight is that we really have a once in a generation opportunity right now to seize the moment, to make these investments," White House Communications Director Kate Bedingfield said on CNN.

In every aspect of the primate television

speech, Biden will echo his mantra that "America is back" -- both in recovering from the coronavirus disaster and in putting the turbulence of the Trump era behind.

When it comes to foreign policy, he "will talk about his commitment to reengaging with the world, taking America's seat back in the world," White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said.

On domestic issues, Biden will make the case for a lengthy Democratic wish list, including police reform, pro-immigrant reforms and gun control -- some of the most sensitive issues in US politics. US presidents usually bend over backwards to avoid or at least hide tax increases.

However, Biden is banking on popular support for his idea of leaning on the super rich to fund the \$1.8t American Families Plan -- both by raising their taxes and closing loopholes they use to escape paying in the first place.

The spending plan, which will need approval by a deeply divided Congress, would pour money into early education, childcare, higher education and other building blocks in what the Biden administration argues will be reconstruction of the country's battered middle class.

German jobless rate holds steady in April

AFP, Frankfurt

Germany's unemployment rate stayed stable at six percent in April, the federal labour agency said Thursday, even as a third coronavirus wave forced new restrictions in Europe's top economy.

Although the country's joblessness rate remained unchanged for the fourth consecutive month, seasonally adjusted figures showed the number of unemployed actually rose slightly by 9,000 people.

In raw numbers, less representative of underlying trends but more closely followed in public debate, the number of people out of work fell by 56,000 to just over 2.77m.

"The labour market is developing solidly. The ongoing restrictions in many areas are slowing down the recovery, but are not leading to new burdens" on the jobs market,

said Detlef Scheele, head of the BA federal labour agency.

Before the pandemic struck last year and idled entire sectors of the economy, Germany's unemployment rate had hovered at

record lows of around five percent.

The country managed to stave off mass layoffs by relying heavily on subsidised short-time work schemes known as "Kurzarbeit" in German.

At the peak of the health crisis last

April nearly six million Germans were placed on reduced hours. That figure has fallen to around 3.2m people currently, yet the number "has been rising steadily" again in recent months, the agency said.

Germany's bars, restaurants, leisure and cultural centres have been closed since November, but the country has struggled in recent weeks to contain an uptick in Covid-19 cases fuelled by the more contagious British virus variant.

The government this month introduced new "emergency brake" legislation to enforce tougher restrictions in hard-hit regions, including renewed closures of non-essential shops, night-time curfews and school closures.

The German economy is projected to have shrunk by 1.8 per cent over the first quarter of 2021, according to forecasts by economic institutes.



AFP/FILE

Most stores have been closed in Germany since December 16.