

Peanut brings smile to char farmers in Pabna, Sirajganj



AHMED HUMAYN KABIR TOPU

Peanut cultivation has become popular as by spending about Tk 4,500, farmers can easily earn Tk 15,000 to Tk 20,000 from one bigha of land. Also, peanut processing factories provide job opportunities for around 1,000 ultra-poor women in the region.

AHMED HUMAYN KABIR TOPU, Pabna
Md Aiyub Khan, a farmer of Kollanpur char in Pabna's Bera upazila, cultivated 10 bighas of land to produce 100 maunds of peanut, the only crop that can be grown on sandbanks.

"The land is not fertile enough to cultivate other crops. So, I cultivated peanuts expecting bumper production. I have already harvested five bighas but the Jamuna river is swelling up now and I am worried about whether I will be able to harvest the rest," he said.

Md Manik Miah, a peanut farmer and trader based in the Nagarbari wholesale market, said farmers of the sandbar areas cultivate peanuts on the barren soil to earn a profit.

"Spending about Tk 4,500, farmers can easily earn Tk 15,000 to Tk 20,000 from one bigha, so peanut cultivation has brought smiles among the shoal farmers," he told The Daily Star.

Manik cultivated peanuts on two bighas of land in the upazila's Roghunathpur village last year.

This year though, he cultivated five bighas expecting to get a bumper production but he is

worried about his harvest getting washed away with sudden floods.

Agriculture officials of Pabna and Sirajganj say farmers in the areas cultivate peanut on the vast sandbanks as their main money-earning crop.

A total of 2,100 hectares of unused shoals in Pabna was brought under cultivation this season with a production target of 4,500 tonnes of peanut, said Md Abdul Kader,

"As such, farmers have rushed to cultivate peanuts over the past few years due to the bumper profit. So the area used for peanut cultivation has also increased," Hanif said.

At least 20 peanut processing factories have been established across the Nakalia, Nagarbari and Bandherhat points of Bera upazila.

They collectively process about 80,000 to one lakh maunds of raw peanuts every year due to

These peanut processing factories provide job opportunities for around 1,000 ultra-poor women in the region.

"Over 50 to 60 workers, most of whom are ultra-poor women, are working in my processing factory. They process 25 to 30 maunds of raw peanuts per day to earn Tk 180-Tk 200," said Md Labu Miah, also a wholesale trader.

"We use to supply peanuts across the country from the Nagarbari wholesale market but the recurring lockdowns across the country over the past year has led to poor demand that worries traders," he added.

"Due to the lockdown and alarming Covid situation, we are unable to sell last year's stock while the new crop is coming into the market. So, we are worried about getting our cash back," said Md Azizul Haque, a wholesale trader.

In 2020, Haque gathered a stock of over 500 maunds of peanuts buying each maund at Tk 2,800. Half of the stock has remained unsold.

However, at least five to eight trucks loaded with processed peanuts are being sent across the country every week, Haque added.

DISTRICTS IN FOCUS

deputy director of the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) office in Pabna.

Md Abu Hanif, deputy director of the DAE office in Sirajganj, said 5,160 hectares of sandbar was brought under peanut cultivation in the district to produce 12,000 tonnes of the crop, of which 77 per cent has already been harvested.

The shoals on the Jamuna river contain the appropriate portion of sand for peanut cultivation.

the bumper output in Pabna and Sirajganj, according to Pabna DAE Deputy Director Kader.

"We buy peanut from farmers for processing at our factories to supply peanuts to big companies and the local market," said Md Imdatul Haque, the owner of a peanut processing factory.

"We buy each maund for around Tk 2,200 and after processing, sell it for about Tk 2,800 per maund," he added.

Digital transactions – the new normal



MOHIUDDIN BABAR

The Covid-19 pandemic has turned out to be a global issue of shared human vulnerability. Except for a few islands in the south Pacific, no country has been spared from the invisible virus. The woes continue to batter the economy and threaten sustainability.

While scientists have succeeded in developing a vaccine, governments in most countries are still battling this biological turbulence by enforcing lockdowns, social distancing, closure of educational institutions, tourism and travel. They are in a dilemma in chalking out a balance between economy and health.

While tomorrow looks uncertain, the pandemic has brought us to a turning point wherein we need to redesign our policies in economic, social, educational, and administrative areas. We need to redefine and reactivate our policies and practices in all fields with due stress on protection, inclusivity and sustainability. That is a massive job that needs colossal resources, prudential thinking, a global approach and stronger faith in science and technology.

Although the Covid-19 is a health crisis, it has a direct arterial impact on the economy. The catastrophe has caused a profound drop in growth, a rise in unemployment, widened inequality and increased poverty. The economic decline can adversely impact the health sector. When money circulation goes downhill, there will be lower tax returns. Moreover, as announced by several governments, the weight of the stimulus packages will be heavier to have a recovery in the balance sheet.

However, technological developments over the last few decades have saved humans and the economy from being totally crushed. Notably, there has been unprecedented development in digital technology, which enables people to access information and facilities even from a remote location.

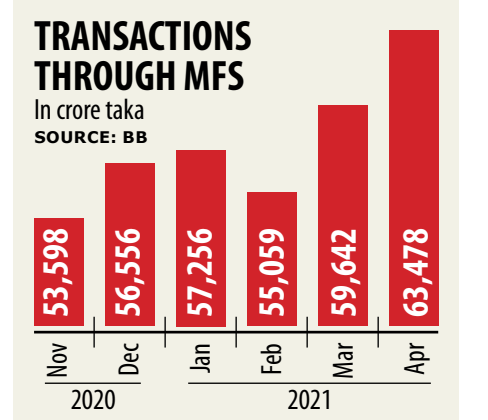
The pandemic has further accelerated the digitalisation of the economies. As all deterrent measures like lockdowns and social distancing were in place, digital

OPINION

transactions have become a daily necessity. The World Bank estimates that globally about 1.7 billion adults still do not have any bank account. However, digital payments through a mobile device are getting popular, and hopefully, it would soon help widen the aspect of financial inclusion.

In Bangladesh, there are 59 scheduled banks with more than 10,000 branches. Yet 40 per cent of the population is still unbanked – a situation has given rise to the mobile financial service (MFS).

Set up by Brac Bank, bKash has shown the MFS way in Bangladesh. Since its operation in the middle of 2011, it has made such a strong impact in the financial ecosystem that even global institutions such as the International Finance Corporation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and Alibaba have become shareholders. Today, bKash owns the majority of the market share, followed by Bangladesh Bank-regulated services like Rocket and Upay.



The usefulness of MFS was best felt during the pandemic. To comply with the new health standards and restrictions and ensure personal safety, more and more people opted for financial transactions through mobile phones. On the back of its wide network, bKash has acquired a huge number of users. Since March 2020, it has added 14,420,370 new customers. Other MFS providers have also had significant customer acquisition.

This financial technology has been highly beneficial in reaching out to the government's initial stimulus package of Tk 5,000 crore to the workers of export-oriented garments industries last year.

READ MORE ON B2

Foreign firms shocked by China's anti-sanctions law

AFP, Beijing

China's quick rollout of a law against foreign sanctions has left European and American companies shocked and facing "irreconcilable" compliance issues, two top business groups said Friday, despite Beijing saying the move would unlikely impact investment.

The law came into effect on Thursday, adding to China's toolbox as it builds its defences against US and EU pressure over trade and human rights.

The move also came just a week after US President Joe Biden expanded a blacklist of Chinese companies in which Americans are not allowed to invest -- allowing Beijing to now hit back at those who formulate or comply with foreign sanctions.

"European companies in China are shocked by the lack of transparency and speed of this process," European Chamber president Joerg Wuttke told AFP, referring to the passing of the new law.

With the fresh rules prohibiting organisations from implementing what Beijing deems discriminatory and restrictive measures, "foreign firms remain very much stuck between a rock and a hard place," he said.

American Chamber of Commerce chairman Greg Gilligan cautioned that the new law "presents potentially irreconcilable compliance problems for foreign companies".

Rushing through a new law without an opportunity for public comment severely jeopardises foreign investor confidence in China's legal system as well, he added.

But Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin told a regular press briefing on Friday he did not see a definite link between the new law and foreign investment. "If anything, the enactment of the anti-foreign sanctions law provides a predictable legal environment... for foreign companies operating in China," he said.

Wuttke, however, warned that the action was not conducive to attracting investment, or in reassuring companies that "already feel they may be used as sacrificial pawns in a game of political chess".



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UK PM stands firm on post-Brexit trade, calls for pragmatism

REUTERS, Arbis Bay, England

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson stood firm in his position on post-Brexit trade with Northern Ireland in talks with French, German and European Union leaders on Saturday, urging "pragmatism and compromise" to find a solution.

His spokesman told reporters other issues were raised in the talks with the leaders and rejected the idea that President Emmanuel Macron had demanded Britain stick to its divorce deal with the EU if it wanted a reset in relations with France.

Johnson, who is hosting a meeting of the G7 - the world's most advanced economies - in southwestern England this weekend, is keen to downplay a row with the EU over their divorce agreement and put the focus on global issues.

But the spokesman said the so-called Northern Ireland protocol, part of the Brexit deal which covers trade with the British province, had been raised in talks with Macron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and EU leaders on Saturday.

"It's important to stress again, with Macron and Merkel a number of issues were raised ... The PM (prime minister) in all cases



REUTERS/FILE

Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson reacts as he meets with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President Charles Michel during the G7 summit in Carbis Bay, Cornwall, Britain on June 12.

(expressed) confidence in the UK's position as regards to the Northern Ireland protocol and the desire for pragmatism and compromise on all sides," the spokesman said.

Asked about Macron's proposal for a reset in relations if Britain showed it would abide by the Brexit deal it

signed, he added: "That's not how I would characterise the meeting this morning. The prime minister and President Macron agreed on the need to deepen the bilateral relationship between the UK and France ... there was no dependence placed on that linked to the protocol."

G7 leaders will endorse 15pc global minimum corporate tax

White House says

REUTERS

G7 leaders meeting in Britain will endorse US President Joe Biden's proposal for global minimum tax of at least 15 per cent on corporations, White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan said on Twitter on Friday.

The US Treasury in May proposed a global minimum corporate tax of at least 15 per cent to try to end a downward spiral of corporate tax rates.

"America is rallying the world to make big multinational corporations pay their fair share so we can invest in our middle class at home," Mr Sullivan tweeted.

By supporting the move, major economies are aiming to discourage multinationals from shifting profits - and tax revenues - to low-tax countries regardless of where their sales are made. Current global tax rules date back to the 1920s and struggle with multinational tech giants that sell services remotely and attribute much of their profits to intellectual property held in low-tax jurisdictions.

US tech giants such as Facebook and Amazon could benefit from the agreement to create a global minimum 15 per cent corporate tax rate if the final deal also scraps increasingly popular digital services taxes, according to industry lobbyists.

The decision had been expected after G7 finance officials backed a tax rate of at least 15 per cent during a meeting on June 5. The US Treasury has said the G7's endorsement will provide momentum for advancing negotiations towards a broader G20 finance meeting in July in Italy.

US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and her counterparts from Germany, Indonesia, Mexico, and South Africa backed the move in a column published on Wednesday by the Washington Post.

US Trade Representative Tai to hold talks in Britain next week

REUTERS, Washington

US Trade Representative Katherine Tai will travel to Britain on Wednesday and hold talks with British trade minister Elizabeth Truss after participating in a US-European Union summit and holding several bilateral meetings, her office said.

Tai first disclosed her trip to Brussels - her first overseas trip - during a town hall hosted by the AFL-CIO trade federation on Thursday, but the UK stop was previously not known.

The US trade czar's office released details late on Friday, saying Tai would arrive in Brussels on Sunday for the US-EU summit and bilateral meetings with counterparts, including EU trade commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis.

"The summit will underscore our commitment to a strong Transatlantic partnership based on shared interests and values," USTR said in a statement. It will focus on the global economy, the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change, digital and trade cooperation and other foreign policy concerns, USTR said.

On Wednesday, Tai will travel to London and hold



REUTERS/FILE

US Trade Representative Katherine Tai testifies before the Senate Finance Committee on Capitol Hill in Washington, US on May 12.

bilateral meetings with British trade secretary Elizabeth Truss before returning to the United States, USTR said.

US allies have been anxious to start talks with Tai after years of tariffs and tensions during the Trump administration. The White House has said it will put new trade deals on hold until it has reviewed Trump's trade policies. Britain and the United States had started talks on a bilateral free trade deal under Trump, but failed to reach an accord before Biden took office.

Prospects for reaching a US-UK deal are slim ahead of the expiration of congressional "trade promotion authority" this summer, sources said.

UK ambassador Karen Pierce told Reuters that US officials were supportive of a free trade deal with Britain, but the timing was unclear given other US domestic priorities.

Britain is working with the European Union to resolve a nearly 17-year-old trade dispute over aircraft subsidies before July 11, when currently suspended tariffs will go back into effect.