Policy framed to recognise farm sector icons

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The agriculture ministry has framed a policy to recognise for the first time contributions of agriculture producers, entrepreneurs and scientists towards the development of the farm sector.

Under the policy, issued at the end of last week, the government would annually recognise 45 persons with an "Agricultural Important Person" (AIP) title for their contributions to agriculture, fisheries, livestock and forests.

Under the policy, the government would annually recognise 45 persons with an "Agricultural Important Person" title for their contribution to agriculture, fisheries, livestock and forests

The AIP will be bestowed on Bangladeshi farmers, agricultural scientists, entrepreneurs, commercial agro-farm owners, agro-processors and agricultural organisers under five categories.

Of the 45, 10 will be for agricultural innovation, 15 for encouraging establishment of commercial farms and agro-processing industries and 10 for production of exportable agricultural products.

Another five will go to agricultural organisations while five to Bangabandhu National Agriculture Award winners.

The title will be valid for one year. During this time, an AIP will get a pass enabling entry to Bangladesh Secretariat, be invited to national ceremonies and get priority in booking air and train tickets alongside cabins in public hospitals for family members.

"This will inspire people to work for innovation and for development of the agriculture sector. We saw a massive positive change in this sector in the last decade," said Mesbahul Islam, senior secretary to the ministry. The government currently recognises businesspeople with a "Commercially Important Person" (CIP) title recognising their roles in the enhancement of industrialisation and exports.

The policy stated some non-eligibility criteria for the AIP, such as those convicted at court, loan defaulters and anyone farming alien and invasive species.

Sylhet tourism on road to recovery

Madhabpur Lake, a popular tourist destination in Kamalganj upazila of Moulvibazar district. Local businesses that depend on tourists for a source of income hope the number of visitors will soon increase if the Covid-19 crisis subsides. The photo was taken recently. COLLECTED

MINTU DESHWARA

DISTRICTS IN FOCUS

Sylhet division is littered with numerous haors, waterfalls, swamp, hills, and tea gardens that make it an attractive tourist destination.

But soon after the Covid-19 outbreak in March 2020, the local tourism industry and all other related businesses were shut down in a bid to keep the deadly virus at bay.

And although the region was reopened for tourists on August 19 this year, the prolonged closure has cast doubt on whether these businesses can recover their losses.

That being said, it was seen during a recent visit to the area that tourist attractions such as Jaflong, Shahjalal Majar, and Madhabkunda Falls, to name a few, were once again packed with people.

Pranesh Goala, chairman of Kalighat Union Parishad in Sreemangal upazila, said the regional tourism sector lost several crore taka due to recurring lockdowns and restrictions on public movement.

"It will be difficult to make up for the loss now," he added.

In the past, around 8,000 people would visit Moulvibazar district every day and although restrictions have been lifted, people are less willing on spending money vacationing due to the economic uncertainty brought on by Covid-19.

Satrojit Acharjee, the manager of a three-star hotel called Rest Inn, said he hopes the number of visitors would increase with time.

Even five-star hotels and resorts such as the DuSai Resort and Spa, Grand Sultan Tea Resort & Golf, and Lemon Garden Resort now hope to swiftly overcome their losses.

Many of these businesses laid off up to 80 per cent of their staff in order to cut costs during the lockdown.

Some of the staff have already been reinstated while the rest will be brought back in phases depending on the situation, according to industry insiders.

Abu Siddique Musa, president of Sreemangal Parjatan Sheba Sangstha, an association of hotel, motel and resort owners, said they were providing various offers, such as discounts, to attract more customers.

"We have been getting a good response so far and if this continues, we will be able to make up for the losses," he added.

But even with the return of domestic tourists, some hotels and resorts that depend on foreign visitors for a bulk of their income are finding it difficult to survive.

"It will be tough to recover from our loss without foreign tourists," said Arman Khan, assistant general manager of the Grand Sultan Tea Resort & Golf in Sreemangal upazila.

READ MORE ON B3

Banglabandha land port sees record revenue

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Thakurgaon

The Banglabandha land port in Rangpur's Panchagarh district collected a record-high amount of revenue in fiscal 2020-21.

About Tk 61 crore was collected at the port, exceeding its Tk 33-crore target for the year by 83 per cent.

This is the highest amount of revenue collected at the port in the last 10 years, according to officials.

The Banglabandha land port has become a gateway to three neighbouring countries -- India, Nepal and Bhutan.

As a result, the port's potential to conduct trade activities is increasing each year, and so is the government's revenue collection, they said.

Besides, businesspeople are becoming more inclined to using the port since it has good communication facilities and a friendly trading atmosphere, they added.

The lowest revenue collected at the port in the last ten years was Tk 7 crore in fiscal 2011-12.

Nasimul Hasan, a C&F agent of the port, said adequate warehouses, yards and sheds would make the port more operational and help increase the government's revenue collection.

Mobin-ul-Islam, assistant customs commissioner of Banglabandha land port, said mainly stones are imported through the port.

In the previous fiscal though, a remarkable quantity of rice was imported through the port, raising the revenue collection despite ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, he added.

GLOBAL BUSINESS

China passes tough new online privacy law

AFP, Beijing

China passed a sweeping privacy law aimed at preventing businesses from collecting sensitive personal data Friday, as the country faces an uptick in internet scams and Beijing targets tech giants hoovering up personal data.

Under the new rules passed by China's top legislative body, state and private entities handling personal information will be required to reduce data collection and obtain user consent.

The Chinese state security apparatus will maintain access to swathes of personal data, however.

Beijing has long been accused of harnessing big tech to accelerate repression in the northwestern Xinjiang province and elsewhere.

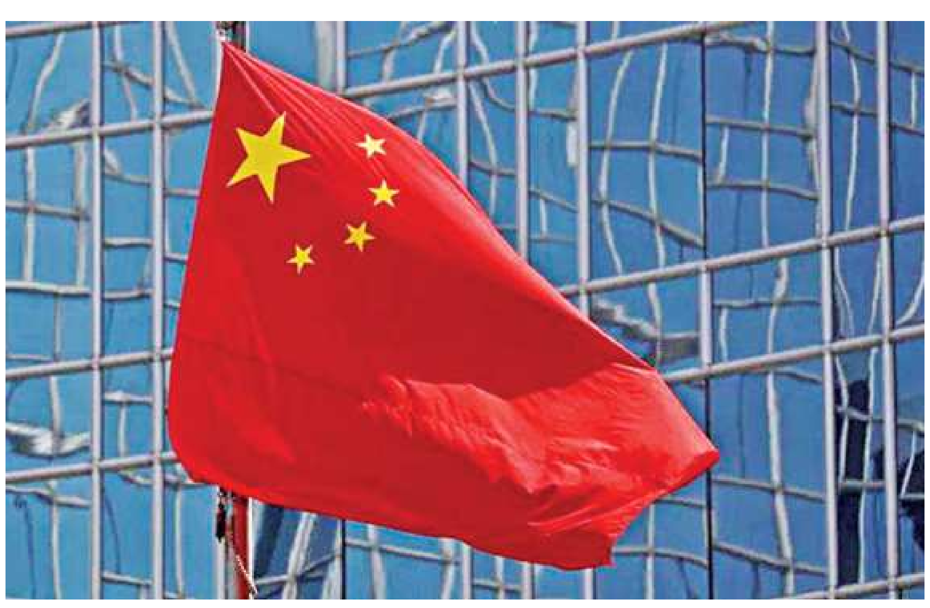
The new rules are also expected to further rattle China's tech sector, with companies like ride hailing giant Didi and gaming behemoth Tencent in regulators' crosshairs in recent months over misuse of personal data.

Chinese tech stocks including Alibaba and Tencent dipped after Friday morning's announcement.

The law aims to protect those who "feel strongly about personal data being used for user profiling and by recommendation algorithms or the use of big data in setting [unfair] prices," a spokesman for the National People's Congress told state news agency Xinhua earlier this week.

It will prevent companies from setting different prices for the same service based on clients' shopping history.

Tens of thousands of consumers have complained about having to pay more for hailing a taxi using an iPhone than a cheaper mobile phone model or for tickets if they are profiled as a business traveller, China's consumer protection watchdog said.



The Chinese national flag is seen in Beijing. Under the new rules, state and private entities handling personal information will be required to reduce data collection and obtain user consent. AFP/FILE

The law is modelled after the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation, one of the world's strictest online privacy protection laws.

"China's new privacy regime is one of the toughest in the world," said Kendra Schaefer, a partner at Beijing-based consulting firm Trivium China. "China is not really looking at the short term with this law.

"Instead, she said, it aims "to establish the foundations for the digital economy over the next 40 or 50 years.

"The law, which comes into effect on November 1, also stipulates that the personal data of Chinese nationals cannot be transferred to countries with lower standards of data security than China -- rules which may present problems for foreign businesses.

Companies that fail to comply can face fines of up to 50 million yuan ($7.6 million) or five percent of their annual turnover.

The law says sensitive personal data includes information which if leaked can lead to "discrimination... or seriously threaten the safety of individuals" including race, ethnicity, religion, biometric data or a person's whereabouts.

But Chinese cities across the country are peppered with surveillance cameras, some outfitted for facial recognition, collecting biometric information daily.

US moves to prolong jobless aid

AFP, Washington

President Joe Biden's administration announced steps on Thursday to allow US states to continue expanded unemployment benefits as the country grapples with a surge in the Delta variant of Covid-19, even as data showed jobless claims declining for a fourth straight week.

Congress approved a massive expansion of the unemployment safety net as the pandemic began last year, but after repeated extensions the programs are due to expire nationwide early next month.

States will be able to use money left over from the $1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan approved in March to continue some of the jobless programs, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and Labor Secretary Marty Walsh said in a letter to top lawmakers.

"There are some states where it may make sense for unemployed workers to continue receiving additional assistance for a longer period of time, allowing residents of those states more time to find a job in areas where unemployment remains high," the officials wrote.

AFP/FILE

A 'We're Hiring!' sign is posted at a Starbucks outlet in Los Angeles, California on August 6.

The pandemic aid boosted benefit payments and helped the long-term unemployed and freelance workers not normally eligible for regular state benefits, but many states cut them off early amid criticism the programs encouraged people not to work, even as employers struggle to fill open positions.

The US job market has improved since it suffered mass layoffs as business shut down or curtailed operations in March 2020, and the unemployment rate fell in July to 5.4 per cent from a pandemic peak of 14.8 per cent in April of last year.

New applications for unemployment benefits declined to another post-pandemic low last week, the Labor Department reported Thursday.

Initial jobless claims fell to 348,000, seasonally adjusted, in the week ended August 14, according to the data, 29,000 fewer than the previous week and less than analysts had expected.

However in a sign of the ground yet to be recovered, the report said more than 11.7 million people were receiving unemployment benefits under all programs as of July 31, including expanded federal aid.

VW reins in production for chip shortage

AFP, Frankfurt

German car giant Volkswagen will slash production at its main plant due to ongoing problems with the global supply of computer chips, a spokesman told AFP on Friday.

Following the summer holidays for workers in Germany, work on the assembly line at the company's facility in Wolfsburg will be "limited" and will have to "adapt to the supply situation", the spokesman said.

Next week, cars will only be produced during the early shift at the factory, while the rest of production will be halted.

Shortages of semiconductors are set to continue, according to the carmaker.

The renewed scarcity is in part the result of "outbreaks of Covid-19, particularly in Malaysia, which have led to factory closures for semiconductor producers", Volkswagen said.

However, the company said it hoped "as far as possible" to make up the setbacks in production over the course of the second half of the year.

Hong Kong quarantine threatens financial hub status: businesses

AFP, Hong Kong

European business leaders have warned that Hong Kong's stringent quarantine measures have left its residents "indefinitely trapped" in the city, threatening its status as an international business centre.

In a rare open letter to chief executive Carrie Lam on Thursday, the European Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong said the city's most recent hardening of measures for inbound travellers were "out of proportion" and a "significant setback".

The Chinese financial hub maintains some of the strictest quarantine rules in the world, an approach that has kept virus cases low but left most residents cut off from the rest of the world for the past 18 months. Arrivals from high-risk countries have to stay in hotel quarantine for 21 days, while for lower-risk countries that drops to seven days followed by another seven days of self-monitoring.

Last week, the authorities announced that a brief flirtation with relaxing some of these rules had to be scrapped. The decision threw travel plans of many into disarray towards the end of the summer holidays, sparked a shortage of hotel rooms and caused growing frustration within the business community.

"We are of the view that Hong Kong must open itself sooner rather than later or this new quarantine regime could lead many in the international community to question if they want to remain indefinitely trapped in Hong Kong when the rest of the world is moving on," Frederik Gollob, chairman of the chamber's board of directors wrote in the letter.

"This concern amongst the international business community could pose, undoubtedly, a growing threat to Hong Kong's status as an international business centre.