Payra bridge to boost trade, tourism

Payra bridge in Lebukhali area of Patuakhali district is scheduled to be inaugurated by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina this month, according to project officials. The photo was taken last week.

PHOTO: TITU DAS

SUSHANTA GHOSH *and* SOHRAB HOSSAIN

DISTRICTS IN FOCUS

The long awaited Payra bridge, which will facilitate road transport between a seaport and popular tourist destinations nearby, is finally nearing completion a good five years after its original due date.

As of December 2020, 106 oceangoing ships carrying various raw materials such as clinker and stone have arrived at Payra port since inception, generating a revenue of Tk 253 crore for the government.

But to carry these goods to other parts of the country, it would usually take a one hour ferry ride to cross the Payra river, costing importers both time and money.

Besides, the same can be said for people looking to travel to the country's southwestern regions, where popular tourist destinations such as Kuakata are located.

Once the 1.47-kilometre bridge is complete, people in Barishal city can travel to the Payra seaport and the Patuakhali district headquarters within an hour while it would take just about two hours to reach Kuakata.

The bridge is scheduled to be inaugurated by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina this month, according to project officials.

All relevant construction work on the bridge is complete and now only the beautification process remains, they said.

"The bridge will pay an integral role in developing the region's economic activities," said Saidur Rahman Rintu, president of the Barishal Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

The shipbuilding, garment, fish processing, and tourism industries will likely benefit the most, he added.

"Payra bridge will be like a gateway to the country' south that has been barred for far too long," said Motaleb Sharif, secretary of the Kuakata Hotel Motel Owners Association.

There are more than 150 hotels in the region that cater to about 10,000 people daily. During the pre-pandemic era, at least 15,000 tourists were visiting each year.

"And with the completion of Payra bridge, I think the number of visitors could easily double," he added. Abdur Rahim Khan, president of the Kuakata Hilsa Fish Suppliers Association, said they ship at least 15 to 20 tonnes of hilsa collected from Kuakata, Alipore and Mahipur all over the country every day.

But if the lengthy travel process is eased through the construction of Payra bridge, then the local fish industry would surely expand, Khan said.

READ MORE ON B3

XI JINPING's STATEMENT AT UN

Will it impact China investment in Bangladesh's power sector?

KHONDAKER GOLAM MOAZZEM

Chinese President Xi Jinping, in his official statement at the General Debate of the 76th Session of the United Nations General Assembly on September 21, announced that China would step up support for other developing countries in generating green and low-carbon energy and would not build new coal-fired power projects abroad.

Such a statement from the top leadership of China has important future implications for the clean energy and power sector across developing countries since China is a major investor/builder in the coal-fired power sector across developing Asia, including Bangladesh. Hence, Bangladesh has got the opportunity to shift from fossil fuel-based power generation to clean energy-based power sector development in the coming years.

President Xi presented four points in his commitment on "Bolstering Confidence and Jointly Overcoming Difficulties to Build a Better World". One of the important messages under the second point was staying committed to harmony between man and nature.

The key message is: China needs to accelerate transition to a green and low-carbon economy and achieve green recovery and development. China will strive to reach its peak in carbon emissions before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060. This requires tremendous hard work, and China will make every effort to meet those goals.

RECENT INITIATIVES BY CHINESE COMPANIES

Czhinese investment under the Belt and Road Initiative has focused on energy transition. The Chinese embassy in Bangladesh is reported to be cancelling planned coal-based power plants.

Pakistan is discouraging investment in new coal-fired power plants, which is likely to be influenced by China's decision to shift from coal-fired power plants as China is a major investor in Pakistan's power sector.

Indonesia has announced to stop building new coal-fired power plants after 2023. This announcement is likely to be influenced by China's stance.

In the recent past, various Chinese public and private sector organisations have expressed their unwillingness to bankroll coal and fossil-fuel based power generation at home and abroad.

Major Chinese political leaders in their public statements have been indicating the policy stance. This is also reflected in declining Chinese overseas investment in coal-fired power projects and rising share of investment in renewable energy.

China's stance on renewable energy and clean power is reflected in its joint statement with the US, where it pledged to expand overseas investment in renewable energy in order to help developing countries transition from fossil fuels.

Chinese Ministry of Commerce and Ministry of Ecology and Environment encouraged companies, which are going for foreign investment and cooperation, to follow international green rules and standards.

Overall, China's global investment in the power sector would likely foresee a directional change through the policy statement of President Xi, provided how this will be enforced institutionally and operationally on the ground.

OPINION

POSSIBLE IMPACT ON POWER SECTOR

Bangladesh may experience a number of the impact of future Chinese policy on power and energy and operational modalities based on the statement of President Xi. It is important to understand the key messages of the statement.

The statement indicates that China will not build any new coal-fired power plants. This is supposed to include no public and private outward foreign investment of Chinese companies, no engagement of Chinese companies as contractors in power projects, and no shareholding or financing of Chinese financial institutions in coal-fired power plants. Such a stance would stop Chinese investment and engagement in coal-fired power sector in Bangladesh.

READ MORE ON B2

GLOBAL BUSINESS

Vietnam's commercial hub back in business after 3-month lockdown

Motorbikes drive past a billboard warning against the coronavirus disease after the government eased nationwide lockdown during the outbreak in Ho Chi Minh on April 25, 2020.

REUTERS/FILE

AFP, *Ho Chi Minh City*

Ho Chi Minh City on Friday lifted a stay-at-home order that had kept its nine million residents indoors for three months and devastated business in Vietnam's economic hub.

To curb a fast-spreading wave of Covid-19 -- which struck the southern metropolis particularly hard -- residents have been unable to leave home, even for food, and almost all travel in and out of the area was suspended.

Almost half of Vietnam's total 790,000 virus cases were reported in the city, along with three-quarters of the country's deaths.

But after a gradual fall in cases, soldiers began dismantling road barriers on Friday and removing hundreds of checkpoints that had separated city districts.

"I am happy," said Tran Van Vu, who owns a store selling fruit, vegetables and meat and had planned to expand his business before the pandemic.

"During the lockdown our company was affected a lot... we didn't have enough delivery men as they had to be tested every two days and it was costly for the company.

"Roads were busy for the first time in months after most businesses were given the go-ahead to reopen and vaccinated people permitted to move freely within the city.

Although authorities have kept a ban on travel to other provinces, thousands of families travelling by motorbike gathered at a checkpoint on the way out of the city, hoping to return to their hometowns.

Vietnam was once hailed as a model for virus containment, but the country struggled to stop the spread of a fourth wave of infection that began in April in northern industrial parks and quickly travelled south.

More than a third of Vietnam's 100 million people were under stay-at-home orders this summer, breaking the country's important manufacturing industry to its knees and breaking supply chains.

Its economy suffered its heaviest contraction on record in the third quarter, officials said Wednesday.

Factories in industrial parks and goods transportation services are among businesses allowed to open, authorities have said.

Less than 10 per cent of Vietnamese are fully vaccinated but Ho Chi Minh City had been allocated the biggest number of jabs with almost all the city's adults inoculated.

Factories struggling as supply constraints hit, costs rise

REUTERS, *London/Tokyo*

Global manufacturing activity took a big hit from supply chain bottlenecks and escalating costs, exacerbated by pandemic-induced factory shutdowns in Asia and signs of slowing Chinese growth, surveys showed on Friday.

While countries where outbreaks of the Delta coronavirus variant receded saw an improvement in activity, growth shrank in some as chip shortages and supply disruptions impacted those still struggling to shake off the hit from Covid-19.

Euro zone and British manufacturing growth remained strong but activity suffered from logistical issues, product shortages and a labour crunch that are likely to persist and keep inflationary pressures high.

"Though some of the bottlenecks should soon start to ease, many sectors – most notably those requiring semiconductors – are likely to face disruption for much of 2022," said Martin Beck, senior economic advisor to the EY ITEM Club.

"This signals activity is likely to remain constrained for some time to come."

IHS Markit's final manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) sank to 58.6 in September from August's 61.4 and Britain's PMI fell for a fourth month in a row, dropping to 57.1 from 60.3. Anything above 50 indicates growth.

Factories in Germany, Europe's largest economy, had been humming along almost undisturbed during the pandemic lockdowns that have impacted the services sector but shortages of intermediate goods and some raw materials are now holding industry back.

REUTERS/FILE

Machinery is seen at a factory, which is out of operation, at an industrial park in Shenyang, China.

Growth in French manufacturing weakened a tad more than initially forecast, its PMI showed, as problems over supplies of goods weighed on the industry.

Those supply bottlenecks kept pressure on the costs of the raw materials factories need and manufacturers passed some of those increases to customers and the euro zone output prices index approached the record high seen in the summer.

Inflation in the common currency area jumped to a 13-year high of 3.4% last month, preliminary official data showed on Friday, well above the European Central Bank's 2.0% target.

Phuket opens to all vaccinated travellers

AFP, *Bangkok*

Fully vaccinated travellers from any country can now book holidays to tourism haven Phuket, the Thai government has announced, under tweaks to a struggling quarantine-free travel scheme.

Thailand's tourism industry has been on its knees, with the coronavirus pandemic and related restrictions slashing visitor numbers from 40 million in 2019 to a mere trickle over the last two years.

Pre-virus, the sector made up a fifth of Thailand's national income, and the travel curbs have fed into the country's worst economic performance in more than two decades.

The kingdom launched a "sandbox" scheme in July, which allowed fully vaccinated travellers from countries considered low-to-medium risk to roam free on the popular beach island for a fortnight, and then afterwards travel to the mainland without quarantine.

Last week, authorities cut the required stay to a week, in line with national changes to quarantine rules.

The Tourism Authority of Thailand announced late Friday that the scheme had been broadened from the around 80 countries already eligible.

"This means Thailand is now welcoming travellers from any country in the world to the sandbox programme," it said in a statement.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Tanee Sangrat said unvaccinated children would be able to travel with their vaccinated parents.

The sandbox programme has already lured more than 38,000 visitors to the white sands of Phuket, and generated $66.67 million.

But tourism operators are lukewarm on the revival of the island's economy, where 90 percent of hotels have been shuttered.

They have been pleading for the government to simplify entry requirements to increase visitor numbers.

The changes will allow previously excluded Indonesians and Malaysians to travel to Phuket. Before the pandemic, Malaysia was Thailand's second biggest source of tourists, with more than four million travellers visiting in 2019.