

BANGLADESH UPDATE



1,181
New cases in 24hrs



5,11,261
Total cases



7,509
Deaths



4,54,563
Recoveries



1,785,857
Deaths



81,877,644
Total cases

THE DAILY STAR ICT AWARDS 2020

Over the last five decades the export-led economy of Bangladesh has grown mainly riding on the apparel and textile sectors, because of a lack of product diversity. Now ICT and IT-enabled services have emerged as the most successful export products of the country as thousands of local experts, engineers and entrepreneurs in the sector have been thriving, defying all odds in business to serve both local and international markets. A silent revolution in ICT and IT-enabled services has been taking place because of relentless strides by local entrepreneurs. The Daily Star has been proudly recognising these unsung and silent ICT heroes since 2016. This year, seven such heroes and companies receive The Daily Star ICT Awards for their outstanding performance and contribution in this field.



SHAIKH ABDUL AZIZ
Chairman, LEADS Corporation Limited
Category: ICT pioneer



RAFIQUL ISLAM ROWLY
MD, CSL Software Resources Ltd
Category: ICT Business Person of the Year



SYED MAMNUN QUADER
MD & CEO, Southtech Group
Category: ICT Solution Provider - Local Market Focus
Winning Company: Southtech Limited



ASIF ZAHIR
MD, Sindabad.com
Category: Digital Commerce
Winning Company: SINDABAD.COM LIMITED



RASHAD KABIR
MD, Dream71 Bangladesh Ltd
Category: ICT Solution Provider - International Market Focus
Winning Company: Dream71 Bangladesh Ltd



TASHFIN DELWAR
Co-founder, Kotha Apps & Technology
Category: ICT Startup of the Year
Winning Company: Kotha Apps & Technology



TANVIR TABASSUM
Co-founder & MD, SIGMIND.ai
Category: ICT Startup of the Year
Winning Company: SIGMIND.ai

Shaikh Abdul Aziz is a visionary leader who has contributed greatly to technological advancements in Bangladesh's ICT sector and a pioneer in bringing disruptive technology to improve and facilitate living standards.

It was his lifelong dream that the country's technically skilled individuals represent Bangladesh all over the world.

Keeping this dream in mind, Aziz founded LEADS Corporation Limited in 1992. He established LEADS Training & Consulting to impart training relevant to current technology to the youth of the nation, thus realising the dream of Digital Bangladesh.

"We are a company having vast experience, observing ethical standards, excelling in dedicated service and cultivating our associates," said Aziz.

Approximately 5,000 former LEADS employees are now working across the globe.

Aziz played a pivotal role in advising the government in 1997 about the need for extending special assistance to the ICT sector, which eventually led to the formation of Bangladesh Association of Software and Services (BASIS).

Born on February 7, 1941, Aziz studied commerce at the University of Dhaka in the early 60s, and then did his MBA from the Institute of Business Administration, Karachi, in 1965, majoring in marketing.

He pioneered in designing, developing and maintaining banking application software.

With the country's garment and textile sectors thriving, CSL has also grown over the years as the company has been supplying software to various leading garment and textile companies since 1998. The company also supplies software to the banking, distribution, mobile and pharmaceuticals sectors.

"We wanted to help the local economy through digital transformation," said Rowly, who graduated with a finance degree from the University of Dhaka. He joined Beximco in 1984 but left the job after a year, going on to build a career in the software industry.

The company, which employs 122 people, has a target to increase its number of clients to 250.

CSL also exports software to six countries -- Sri Lanka, India, Japan, Ethiopia, Jordan and the USA. "We are working hard to grab more foreign market share," said Rowly.

Rowly served as president of BASIS between 2008-09. An expert in business process analysis and reengineering, designing workflow-based application architecture and implementation methodology, he is co-founder of Computer Solution Ltd. and SoftEdge Ltd.

He is also currently chairperson of the executive committee and member of the governing body of Dnet.

Southtech started its journey as a software company in 1996 mainly to provide Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) solutions mainly for banking and microfinance institutions. For instance, Southtech has been providing two lakh employees' ERP solution to Brac and is working with the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh.

It aims to serve large local corporations in the next four to five years.

Although the company has been working locally, it is also providing ERP solutions to a large microfinance enterprise in Myanmar. The company successfully set up a data centre and network in a remote part of Myanmar despite significant challenges, with the country soon set to be a good market for providing ERP solutions.

The company also has a small office in Bhutan and has been eyeing the African region with its fast-growing economies.

Southtech, with 70 clients and more than 4,890 successful implementations across the world, counts 95 percent repeated clients. It now has a team of more than 240 employees and has been growing at 10 percent year on year.

"Getting an honour from the Daily Star is indeed an honour. Getting recognition of this kind is truly inspiring for us," said Quader in his reaction to the award.

Sindabad, which started its journey in 2016, has proved that any company can grow rapidly by serving local SMEs, especially grocery shops, through an online buying and selling platform.

A venture of Ananta Group, Bangladesh's first and largest B2B e-commerce site caters to offices and businesses for their regular purchase needs.

Since the company supplies goods through its online platform directly from wholesalers to retail shops, the middlemen cannot take away profits and transparency is also ensured. Any enterprise can download the Sindabad app and place orders and will receive the goods within the specified time.

As a result, the platform became very popular within a short time. The company has grown extraordinarily, at 600 percent, in its basic commodity segment during the pandemic. Currently, Sindabad has 15,000 enlisted customers -- pre-Covid, this figure was 5,000.

"The year 2020 was a trial by fire for all of us and the industry," said Asif Zahir, managing director of the company, adding, "During the pandemic, we were able to reach the customers through the app and e-commerce site and delivered essential products."

Sindabad has already won the Best Startup by BASIS in National ICT Awards 2018 and the 18th APICTA Merit Award for Best Startup.

Dream71 Bangladesh Ltd is a promising software, web application, mobile application and game development company which aims to create a new standard in the era of software technology.

"Dream71 has supplied software to the government's a2i programme, Wasa, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ICT Division of the government and Biman Bangladesh Airlines," said Kabir.

Graduating from Khulna University of Engineering and Technology (Kuet) with a degree in electrical and electronics engineering, Kabir set up his own business in 2014.

Currently, he employs 74 skilled software engineers in his company, which has been growing at 30 percent every year based on high demand from his clients.

Dream71 Bangladesh Ltd is also providing software solutions to a number of countries -- including Japan, South Korea, UAE, Nigeria, and Kenya.

The company's next step is to increase its reach in foreign markets. For instance, it has been working to supply its software to East Timor Parliament and to Turkey under a UNDP project. Dream71 has supplied its software to 12 countries with African countries gradually becoming a major hub for the company.

Kotha is the first Bangladeshi social and lifestyle platform, which has a growing community of 1.5 lakh users of the app.

While the concept of starting the business originated back in 2015, the company was formally launched on February 12 this year after taking feedback about its services and products from users over the years.

The app, the objective of which was to reduce dependence on foreign platforms, saw a big jump in the number of users during the pandemic.

The company has been working on communication and social networking as Bangladesh has a big market of lifestyle and digital services like ridesharing, e-health tips and e-learning.

"On our platform, we have brought all these daily life services into a single window where our customers can get their expected services and products," said Tashfin Delwar.

Other online marketing platforms Daraz and Hungrynaki have also been included in Kotha platform so that customers can avail these services in a single app. The company is also working to integrate bKash into its platform.

The company employs 13 skilled professionals and its business model is earning commission from partnering companies.

Recently, it established a joint venture for the Sri Lankan market.

The gruesome attack at Holy Artisan Café prompted a local company to use artificial intelligence to ensure that the police be alerted to realtime criminal incidents with a signal. Sigmind.ai can transform regular cameras into artificial intelligence cameras for surveillance.

For instance, facial recognition technology can be used to detect a criminal, whose photo has been uploaded onto the server, if seen on these cameras. Similarly, car theft can be prevented with an application using the same formula," said Abu Anas Shuvom, founder chairman and CEO, Sigmind.ai.

"Currently, we are working with the police to set up the system in the Gulshan area. It is also possible to identify whether anybody is wearing masks or not through this special kind of camera."

The private limited company was formally launched in July 2016 by five entrepreneurs. It has delivered its application to 12 clients, including Indian state of Maharashtra's traffic management system in 2018.

Sigmind secured its name in the top 10 out of 1,200 startups in Istanbul, Turkey in November last year. Last year, it won the BASIS National ICT Award in the startup category.

"It is a big achievement for startups like us and a recognition of our hard work," Tanvir Tabassum said about the award.

Tech heroes triumph in the time of pandemic

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The ICT Startup category award went to Kotha Apps & Technologies Ltd, the first Bangladeshi social and lifestyle platform.

It has a growing community of 150,000 Bangladeshi users for its social media and lifestyle contents and services integrated into one app.

Sigmind.ai took home the award in the ICT Startup category.

Riding on its expertise in deep learning and transforming any normal camera with artificial intelligence, the company's facial recognition technology works for a broad range of conditions with great accuracy, allowing for more robust, less biased detection and classification.

Rafiqul Islam Rowly was named the ICT Business Person.

An expert in business process analysis and reengineering, designing workflow-based application architecture and implementation methodology, Rafiqul served as the president of the BASIS from 2008 to 2009.

Shaikh Abdul Aziz, who contributed greatly to the establishment of the technological sector in Bangladesh, won the award in the ICT Pioneer category.

He founded Leads Corporation Ltd in 1992 and about 5,000 of its former employees are now working all over the world.

Planning Minister MA Mannan congratulated the awardees and termed the young entrepreneurs contributing to the information technology sector game-changers.

He said the country had progressed much in the use of digital technology thanks to the immense role played by the young IT professionals in the private sector.

"People in remote areas of the country are now able to get goods and commodities through online orders," he said, adding that the government is proactively helping to create the environment for digital transformation, which is also taking place in government activities.

"The government has introduced e-tender to bring changes to bidding procedures by using IT."

He hopes the energetic young

generation and the experienced elder generation would work together to make further progress in the IT sector. He thanked The Daily Star and other organisers for arranging the ICT awards for the fifth time.

Speaking at the ceremony, Sergi Herrero said it was very important to



SELIM RF HUSSAIN
Managing director and CEO of Brac Bank

recognise the talents Bangladesh has. "Believe me, I spent twelve years of my life in Silicon Valley and I can tell you that the talent of Bangladesh engineers is second to none."

"We have to provide the right tools and facilities so that everybody can develop their talents in a country like Bangladesh."

Sergi said he was delighted to see the awarding event and the recognition. "It is not something that we should forget tomorrow morning... I think it has to be on top of our mind on how we can change the world from Bangladesh. It may sound a bit naive or grandiose, but I truly believe it... I think the capacity and talent is there. It is up to us to support and encourage this type of development."

He believes the first thing is investment as gaps need to be closed. "There is a big digital gap. We have to unite forces to ensure we allow these new technologies to empower people. If we can't do that, I think it is going to be a missed opportunity."

Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star, began his speech with a quote by Albert Einstein -- "Every crisis is an opportunity."

"We, in Bangladesh, like in many other countries, have shown how to make this crisis into an opportunity."

"Yes, it was most devastating. It hit us at the family level, society level, the industry and government level. Yet, given the traditional resilience of our people, government policies and futuristic entrepreneurs, we all turned the crisis into opportunity."

The pandemic has made the



MD SABUR KHAN
Chairman, Daffodil Int'l University

impossible possible although it came at a great cost, he said, adding, "But a nation is known, praised and appreciated by how it turns around and Bangladesh did that. We are doing an excellent job."

Mahfuz Anam said the awards were introduced to recognise, inspire and encourage.

"Through recognition, inspiration and encouragement, this award is trying in its own modest way to push the country forward."

The award also aims to draw the attention of the policy-makers, who see the initiatives and new thinking now prevalent in the society through the awardees.

"We also like to attract additional investment to this sector because ideas can't go too far without funds."

Selim RF Hussain, managing director and CEO of Brac Bank, said, "This is a very inspiring time for the ICT sector of Bangladesh. Possibly, the only positive outcome of the pandemic is the entire digitalisation agenda in Bangladesh has received a great a boost and significant acceleration."

He added that information technology and digital technologies, in particular, have made new headlines and reached people in this country in

almost every level.

"Our march with innovative ideas in terms of ICT and digital services began many years ago with the honourable prime minister's dream of a Digital Bangladesh. Today, that dream is a reality," he said.

Md Sabur Khan, chairman of



SYED ALMAS KABIR
President BASIS

Daffodil International University's board of trustee, said the pandemic has made people realise the importance of digitalisation in daily life, business, social life and even in family life.

The newspaper and the ICT sector should now focus on how industries can benefit from the best practices in the ICT sector, he added.

The pandemic changed lives overnight, took away lives, caused businesses to close and revenues to plummet. But the world survived and this has been possible because of the ICT sector, said Syed Almas Kabir, president of the BASIS, adding, "The pandemic has made us realise the necessity of ICT across all sectors. New opportunities for the sector will also open up in this new normal."

Almas said the ICT is a perfect industry for Bangladesh because it depends on knowledge workers that the country has in abundance.

In order to embrace the fourth industrial revolution, upskilling and reskilling the human resources is extremely important, he said. "By making ourselves skilled in frontier technologies, we will rebrand Bangladesh as a country of skilled labour, not cheap labour anymore."

The ICT Awards is powered by Brac Bank and Daffodil International

University and enlightened by the BASIS.

"The award is more for the employees and everyone," said Zeeshan Kingshuk Huq, co-founder and CEO of Sindabad.com.

Asif Zahir, its managing director, said, "The year 2020 was a trial by fire for all of us and the industry."

When the pandemic began, the traditional supply chain collapsed, and there was massive disruption everywhere, he said.

Luckily, Sindabad was prepared to some extent and stepped up to face the new challenge, filling the gap in the areas where customers were looking for a solution, Asif said.

"During the pandemic, we are able to reach the customers through the app and e-commerce site and delivered essential products. This is an excellent testament to the power of digital technologies and e-commerce."

He dedicated the award to the frontline workers who worked day and night risking lives to deliver the goods, the warehouse staffers and the sourcing and IT teams.

Sayed Mamnun Quader, managing director of Southtech, said, "Getting the award means a lot not only to myself but also to everyone who works at Southtech."

In response to a question during a newspaper interview in 1992, Shaikh Abdul Aziz had said all documents had to be thrown out of the windows of government offices to develop the ICT industry.

"I am telling this even today. Otherwise, our ICT industry would not flourish," said Aziz yesterday.

Rafiqul Islam Rowly said The Daily Star has been organising the awards for five years. "It has already set a benchmark and encouraged many other companies."

He said when the whole world had been going through the pandemic, technology players and businesses kept nations up and running.

Abu Anas Ibn Samad, CEO of Sigmind.ai, said, "The pandemic hit hard in the beginning of 2020 but it could not stop our progress that much. We have been innovating and reimplementing our solutions, thinking out of the box."

Tashfin Delwar, chief executive officer of Kotha Technologies, said,

"The award really means a lot to us." Dream71 Managing Director Rashad Kabir said, "We have been working for the last six to seven years to export Bangladeshi IT products and services to other countries. We are also working to present that Bangladeshis as a skilled workers and engineers."

According to the ICT division, Bangladesh's export earnings from the ICT sector reached about \$1 billion, riding on the growth of more than 1,500 firms and 40 offshore development centres.

The sector received a massive boost in 2008 when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina laid out the vision of building a Digital Bangladesh by 2021.

2 Star journos win best reporting awards of CRAB

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Two journalists of The Daily Star got Best Reporting Award 2020 announced by Bangladesh Crime Reporters Association (CRAB) yesterday.

They were awarded in different categories.

Mohammad Jamil Khan for best investigative report (print/online) on narcotics and Rafiqul Islam for best report (print/online) on human rights.

Eight journalists got the award in as many categories. Every awardee will be given Tk 30,000.

The other awardees are: Aynal Hossain of Sharebiz for best investigative report (print/online), Sajjad Parvez and Imtiaz Momin Sony of Jamuna Television for best investigative report (television/radio), Sajjad Parvez of Jamuna Television for best investigative report on narcotics (TV/radio), Samir Kumar Dey of Ittefaq for best report on women and children repression (print/online), Nadia Sharmeen of Ekattor TV for best report on women and children repression (television/radio) and Shafiq Shaheen of NTV for best report on human rights (television/ radio).