



A good crop and a rebound in sales following the improvement of the coronavirus situation have brought back smiles to the face of farmers in Gadkhali of Jashore, a flower hub. The photo was taken recently.

PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

Gadkhali: flower hub reemerging from pandemic woes

DIPANKAR ROY, *Khulna*

As the dawn breaks, agricultural fields in Gadkhali, a remote village in the southwest district Jashore, unfold themselves with abundance of colours, calling upon nature lovers to come inside and feel the beauty of nature.

And nature lovers promptly respond. Anyone visiting the locality during this winter period would notice it easily.

Fields buzz amid presence of flower lovers since early morning and the crowd continues to grow as the day wears on.

Flowers are as far as the eye can see! From marigolds, cosmos, daisy gypsies, roses, gladioli, tuberose, gerbera, dahlias to chrysanthemums, all decorate the fields which, apart from becoming a source of celestial beauty, provide livelihoods to tens of hundreds of farmers in the region.

Every day, nearly 10,000 tourists from neighbouring districts and other parts, including Dhaka visit the locality to see eye-catching flower fields, which also offer a source of income for the locals.

The floriculture, which began couple of decades ago in this locality, is the biggest source of flowers used to celebrate social, cultural and national festivals in the country today.

Some 42 local and foreign varieties of flowers are grown commercially in 625 hectares area in 35 villages of Jashore. About 6,500 farmers and 100,000 workers are involved in floriculture here, said Badal Chandra Biswas, deputy director of the Department of Agricultural Extension in Jashore.



PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

And after the devastation caused by Covid-19 related lockdowns enforced first in March 2020 and later in the mid-2021 and the cyclone Amphan, farmers are now trying to make a turnaround as the economy is recovering following reopening from August last year.

Farmers said production and demand of flowers increased and prices of flowers were also higher this season than the previous winter. If this trend continues, many of them would be able to make up their pandemic caused losses.

The estimate of cultivation in the current fiscal year is yet available.

In the fiscal year of 2020-21, farmers in Bangladesh grew flowers on 2,264 hectares of land, down marginally from 2,298 hectares the previous year,

according to the DAE.

Jashore district accounts for one-fourth of the total cultivation area of flowers followed by Dhaka and Chattogram.

"Actually, during the lockdown, we couldn't sell any flowers. But the plants were alive," said Ismail Hossain, owner of Shishir Nursery and Cut Flower Centre at Gadkhali.

He has planted different kinds of flowers, including gerbera, cosmos, and daisy gypsies on his seven bighas of land this season and sold the flowers at higher prices on the eve of Martyred Intellectuals Day on December 14 and Victory Day on December 16.

The cyclone Amphan destroyed two of his sheds and damaged plants in the

fields. Amid the pandemic, demand for flowers fell, handing a Tk 45 lakh loss to Hossain.

He expects that sales would increase in the next two months which coincided with four biggest sales period: Pahela Falgun (the first day of spring season), Valentine's Day, International Mother Language Day, and Independence Day.

Amir Hossain, a farmer of Panisara union under Jhikargacha of Jashore, also looks to the coming sales season with the hope to recover from losses.

"This year both the weather and political situation are favourable and the farmers are most likely to make hefty profit from flower sales," said Md Monirul Islam, secretary of the Gadkhali Phulchashi and Kalyan Samiti, an association of flower growers.

He said daily sales now stand Tk 50 lakh to Tk 1 crore in the Gadkhali market.

Abdur Rahim, president of the Bangladesh Flower Society, says nearly 70 per cent of the country's demand for flowers are met from Jashore. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, there was a loss of at least Tk 300 crore of business in the Jashore region only, he said.

"We expect the seasonal flower business to be over Tk 500 crore this season. Farmers recorded nearly Tk 250 crore of sales on the eve of the Victory Day and New Year 2022," said DAE's Badal Chandra.

"Real farmers will benefit more if the marketing system is developed and the middlemen are removed," he said, adding the government was working towards this goal.

Challenges facing banks as pandemic persists

SYED MAHBUBUR RAHMAN

When we started the year, we saw Covid-19 was having a downswing. It showed upswing from the first quarter and we saw the country getting into lockdown in the last week of June. However, things started improving from the third quarter.

Loan payment relaxation has already been extended a number of times.

At the beginning of the year, the Bangladesh Bank advised that extension can be given on the basis of bank-customer relationship, depending on certain criteria. Later, it got amended twice: once up to June and later up to December subject to the fulfillment of certain conditions because of the resurgence of coronavirus caseloads.

Payment pause was given primarily to ease the debt load of the distressed borrowers suffering due to the pandemic. But the reality appeared different than thought. Along with habitual borrowers, many good borrowers are not paying on time.

Missing payment is making banks' fund management difficult and skeptical in fresh investment. We have seen customers who were willing to pay but have also declined to clear because of the forbearance.

Overall trade surged following the reopening of economic activities, both domestic and global. We saw an increase in value of import in both capital machinery and working capital category, which speaks of the fact that we are getting used to living with Covid-19.

Trade deficit widened three-fold in the first quarter of 2021 for higher import payment pressure. Overall, imports are price-driven, rather than volume-driven. Positive news is that export quickly came back on track. \$40 billion plus earnings are possible as the shipment is well above the strategic target in the first half of the current fiscal year. This optimism will prevail if the export destinations remain open for trade.

Strong remittance inflow was observed until the first half of 2021 stabilising the foreign exchange market and building strong reserves. It also helped increasing local currency liquidity as the BB was buying dollar from the market to keep the dollar-taka rate steady. However, the recent declining remittance trend coupled with rising import and deferred letters of credit payment made the US dollar costlier.

Accordingly the reverse is now happening – the BB is now selling dollars to banks. As a result, the taka liquidity is getting reduced. The greenback crisis stretched the rate differential in the formal and the curb market, another reason for decreasing remittance.

It looks like the informal channel such as hundi has resurfaced after a pause caused by Covid-19.

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Singapore economy rebounds from recession

AFP, Singapore

Singapore's economy grew 7.2 per cent last year, rebounding from its worst recession since independence sparked by the coronavirus pandemic, government data showed Monday.

The city-state plunged into its worst economic performance in 2020 as businesses and international borders shut down, choking its trade and tourism economic lifeline.

Authorities initially imposed tough measures to restrict movement and gatherings but later shifted to a policy of living with the virus as the majority of residents got fully vaccinated. Singapore has logged a total of 280,290 cases with 829 deaths as of Sunday.

The trade ministry released advance estimates Monday showing the economy expanded by 5.9 per cent year-on-year in the fourth quarter to December.

This brought full-year economic growth to 7.2 per cent, reversing a 5.4 contraction in 2020, the country's worst since independence in 1965.

Manufacturing, a pillar of the trade-

reliant economy, surged 12.8 per cent year-on-year driven by global demand for semiconductors and semiconductor equipment, the ministry said.

Construction, a driver of domestic growth, rose 18.7 per cent for the full year.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong however said in his New Year message that Singapore was not out of the woods yet.

"Entering the new year, the fight against Covid-19 is not over. The Omicron variant has brought new uncertainties," Lee said.

He added, however, that Singapore was in a better position to deal with the virus compared to two years ago as booster jabs have been rolled out and vaccination of children under 12 years is underway.

"We have also learnt to better manage the public health challenges while minimising the hit on our economy," he said.

"As we brace ourselves for the impact of Omicron, we can be quietly confident that we will cope with whatever lies ahead."

He added that the economy is expected to grow 3.0-5.0 per cent this year.



A general view of the buildings at the financial and business district of Singapore on June 28, 2021.

PHOTO: AFP/FILE