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PHOTO: SOHRAB HOSSAIN

# Kuakata hotel business collapses as Covid curbs return

SOHRAB HOSSAIN, Patuakhali

Hotel and motel owners in Kuakata, one of the most popular tourist spots in Bangladesh, are once again paying heavy prices as bookings are being cancelled owing to the latest spike in coronavirus cases. The latest blow came in the middle of the peak tourist season after the government moved to tighten rules to limit the damages from the ongoing third wave of infections. As the coronavirus situation is deteriorating, the government issued an 11-point directive on January 12 to protect the public from the fast-spreading coronavirus variant Omicron. After the issuance of the directive, the number of

tourists in the beach town of the southern Patuakhali district has decreased at an alarming rate, bringing immediate losses for the hotel and motel owners and others involved in the hospitality industry. Md Shahin, manager of Banani Palace, a hotel, says it had a booking for 250 people for an annual picnic on Saturday. The booking was cancelled two days ago. The hotel has 32 double rooms, but there were tourists in only two rooms on Friday. As the remaining 30 rooms were empty, the financial loss was Tk 45,000, he said. "Now, it has become difficult for us to pay the salaries and allowances to the staff." Abdur Rahim Khan, the owner of Khan Palace, says the

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hotel had lodging reservations on Saturday for 150 tourists from Dhaka. But they cancelled the booking on Wednesday. Besides, 40 tourists from Jashore were supposed to

come and stay on January 20 and 21, but the bookings were cancelled as well, he said. Jashim Uddin, general secretary of a teachers' association in the district, said, "We booked hotel rooms for a team of 50 for an annual picnic at the end of this month. But due to the worsening coronavirus situation, we had to cancel the reservations." There are 130 standard residential hotels in Kuakata. Of them, 70 are members of the Kuakata Hotel-Motel Owners Association. These hotels have a combined accommodation facility for 10,000 tourists, said Motaleb Sharif, general secretary of the association. The number of tourists remains usually high on Fridays

and Saturdays. But only 300 tourists were in Kuakata on Friday, leaving the hotels with a financial loss of Tk 75 lakh to Tk 80 lakh daily. Sharif says the hospitality industry in the tourist destination has lost thousands of crores of taka in lost revenue since the pandemic hit the country nearly two years ago. "We have to count more losses now as coronavirus cases are rising," he said. He says the burden of financial losses has become so heavy that some hoteliers are planning to close their operations for good. He sought incentives from the government for the tourism-related businesses in Kuakata so that they can ride out the new financial troubles.

## Incepta to produce Covid drug molnupiravir

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Incepta Pharmaceuticals Ltd, one of the leading pharmaceutical companies in Bangladesh, is going to produce Covid-19 treatment drug molnupiravir. It received a sub-licence to manufacture the oral drug from MSD, the US drug-maker, through the Medicine Patent Pool (MPP), said the Bangladeshi company in a press release yesterday. The MPP is an UN-backed organisation that negotiates public health-driven licences with patent holders, and sub-licences to generic manufacturers to encourage the sale of low-cost generic versions of medicines. Molnupiravir received approval from the UK Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) last November and the US FDA emergency use authorisation in December for the treatment of mild-to-moderate coronavirus disease in adults with positive results of direct SARS-CoV-2 viral testing. The drug is also used to treat the patients at high risk for progression to severe Covid-19, including hospitalisation or death, and for whom alternative treatment options authorised by the FDA are not accessible or clinically appropriate. MSD and the MPP have given the sub-licence to facilitate affordable global access for molnupiravir use in 105 low- and middle-income countries, including Bangladesh. Incepta Pharmaceuticals has stringent regulatory authority approved or World Health Organisation pre-qualified manufacturing facilities and experiences as a major supplier to global and key low and middle-income procurers. Abdul Muktadir, chairman and managing director of Incepta, said: "Incepta can supply this product from two of its facilities." One of the facilities is approved by UK authorities and another by German authorities. "We have initially allocated 90 million capsules capacity for this product. But if required, we can allocate much more." "We believe we can become a global hub for low-cost production of this kind of products and can play a major role in the effort to end this pandemic," Muktadir said in the press release.

## Cricketer Mushfiqur MetLife 360Health app ambassador

STAR BUSINESS DESK

MetLife Bangladesh has named national cricketer Mushfiqur Rahim as health ambassador for its MetLife 360Health app. Ala Ahmad, chief executive officer of MetLife Bangladesh, and Mushfiqur Rahim, former captain of the Bangladesh cricket team, signed an agreement at the insurer's head office in Dhaka yesterday, according to a press release. Under the agreement, Mushfiqur will share exclusive fitness, lifestyle and diet tips in the app to help people build good habits and attain overall well-being.

## Competition

FROM PAGE 1  
commerce ministry last October.

The regulations also mention the issue of conducting investigations within the date fixed by the commission and not exceeding more than 45 working days past the stipulated time frame. The power of the BCC to file lawsuits and conduct proceedings has also been included in the regulations. The Competition Act, enacted in 2012, has been prepared to promote, ensure and sustain a congenial atmosphere for competition in trade, and to prevent, control and eradicate collusion, monopoly and oligopoly, combination or abuse of dominant position or activities averse to competition.

Before the enactment of the law, the Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practises (Control and Prevention) Ordinance, 1970, was in force. To achieve the objectives of the act, the government formed the BCC. There are currently six ongoing cases with the BCC, which has so far settled five cases and will give orders or judgements in nine others. Besides, investigation is under way for over 15 allegations. Islam said the vision of the organisation is to make the market competitive through advocacy, engagement and enforcement of the law. He went on to say that it is a normal tendency of people to avoid responsibility.

## Airbus cancels Qatar Airways plane order

AFP, Paris

Airbus has taken the extraordinary step of cancelling a multi-billion dollar order of 50 planes from Qatar Airways, a major customer, in an escalating feud over the airline's grounding of A350 aircraft. The Qatari company, one of the Gulf region's "big three" carriers, has grounded nearly half of its 53-plane A350 fleet over degradation of exterior fuselage surfaces. The airline has taken the dispute to the High Court in London and stopped accepting further deliveries of the wide-body aircraft from the European firm until the problem is resolved.

An Airbus spokesman told AFP on Friday that the aircraft maker has "terminated" a contract with Qatar Airways for 50 single-aisle A321neo aircraft, "in accordance with our rights". It is usually airlines that cancel orders when they no longer need them or cannot afford them anymore. The order was worth more than \$6 billion at catalogue prices, though airlines are usually charged less for large purchases. Qatar Airways said in a statement that it had been adhering to all of its contractual obligations with Airbus. "It is therefore a matter of considerable regret and frustration that Airbus has taken the apparent decision to expand and escalate this dispute," the airline said. The two companies had their first hearing on the A350 dispute in court on Thursday. Qatar Airways demanded \$618 million in compensation, plus \$4 million more per day for each day the A350 planes have been kept idle, a source close to the matter said. Airbus said it cancelled the A321neo orders because Qatar Airways failed its contractual obligations by refusing to take deliveries of A350 planes. The aerospace giant has acknowledged the existence of paint degradation, which can expose a metallic mesh that protects

aircraft from lightning strikes. But Airbus says the issue poses no air safety problems. The aerospace giant has said the European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) confirmed its findings that the paint-related issue had "no airworthiness impact on the A350 fleet". The row erupted in August last year when Qatar Airways announced that its country's aviation regulator ordered the grounding of 13 A350 planes due to the fuselage issue. There are now 21 airplanes sitting on the tarmac. Airbus was supposed to deliver 23 more A350 planes to the airline but Qatar Airways has refused to accept them since last summer. Other airlines have found similar paint issues with their A350 planes, but Qatar Airways is the only one to have grounded aircraft. "Qatar Airways' number one priority remains the safety of its passengers and crew," it said in its Friday statement. "For this reason, all affected aircraft remain grounded, and we are unable to accept delivery of further aircraft tendered for delivery by Airbus." It released a video showing widespread flaking of paint from the fuselages of several aircraft, exposing the metallic mesh underneath, saying "these defects are not superficial". Airbus said last month that it was ready to seek independent arbitration to settle the dispute. In an unusually stern statement about a client, Airbus said at the time that the "attempt by this customer to misrepresent this specific topic as an airworthiness issue represents a threat to the international protocols on safety matters". Qatar Airways took the matter to the London court instead. A new hearing is scheduled for the week of April 26. "We welcome the decision of the court to expedite this issue and order a hearing in April in an effort to bring about a more rapid resolution to the dispute," it said.

## Cricketer Shakib

FROM PAGE B1  
beauty items, groceries, home appliances, music, books, pet supplies, playsets, sports and outdoors items and toys and games. Shakib's Monarch Mart is making an appearance amid a lot of debate on e-commerce businesses. Top executives of several e-commerce companies have been arrested and jailed for violating promises made to customers. Shakib already has investments in eateries, the stock market, power plants, cosmetics, travel agencies, hotels, event management, and farms for crab and Asian swamp eel. However, despite him being on the list of shareholders, a proposed Peoples Bank has failed to manage Bangladesh Bank's approval in starting operations. The proposed bank was scheduled to open a company and managed the required paid-up capital by December 31 last year, but failed to do so. At present there are about 2,500 e-commerce sites and 1,50,000 Facebook-based outlets delivering almost 30,000 products a day, says the e-Commerce Association of Bangladesh. The e-commerce sector is estimated to have annual sales of Tk 8,000 crore and is growing at around 75 per cent each year. By 2023, sales are expected to exceed Tk 25,000 crore.



Superbrands Bangladesh's third council meeting 2022-23 was virtually held yesterday to identify the topmost brands of the country. Ashraf Bin Taj, managing director of International Distributions Company Bangladesh, Muhammad Abdul Moyeen, dean of the Faculty of Business Administration at the University of Dhaka, Farzanah Chowdhury, managing director of Green Delta Insurance Company, Humayun Rashid, managing director of Energypac Power Generation, Nazia Andaleeb Preema, director of Bangladesh Brand Forum, and Niaz Rahim, group director of Rahimafrooz Bangladesh, were present.

PHOTO: SUPERBRANDS BANGLADESH

## Price spike to raise

FROM PAGE B1  
Poultry Industries Central Council, citing that prices rose to Tk 25 per kg last June from Tk 18 to Tk 19 during the harvesting period. Globally, maize prices rose to \$264 per tonne in December 2021 from \$248.7 the previous month, according to World Bank Commodities Price Data. Average prices of the grain surged 57 per cent year-on-year to \$259 per tonne in 2021 from \$165 per tonne, the data shows. China stocked 25 per cent higher than its requirement of the grain, said Rahman, also managing director of Paragon Group. China is expected to have 69 per cent of the globe's maize reserves

level before," he added. Abdul Kader Bepari, a farmer at Chuadanga, one of the biggest maize producing districts in western Bangladesh, said high prices encouraged cultivation of the grain this year. Muhammad Arman Ali, owner of Arman Traders in Dinajpur, another major producing zone in the country's northwest, echoed him. FH Ansarey, managing director and chief executive of ACI Agribusinesses of ACI, said maize seed sales grew this cultivation season. He said overall seed sales shot up 4,200 tonnes in the July-December period of 2021, up from 3,000 tonnes during the same period the year before. "Historically, prices have never reached this