



The government is now providing 50-70 per cent subsidy to expedite agriculture mechanisation, Agriculture Minister Muhammad Abdur Razzaque said.

PHOTO: MOSTAFA SHABUJ

Farm mechanisation crucial for food sufficiency: minister

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Mechanisation in agriculture is very crucial for Bangladesh to maintain food sufficiency as the government aims to ensure that no one goes hungry, said Agriculture Minister Muhammad Abdur Razzaque yesterday.

The government is now bearing 50 per cent to 70 per cent of the cost of farm machinery through subsidies to expedite mechanisation. “We have already modernised agriculture significantly,” he said.

Razzaque was addressing a two-day workshop on “Agricultural Mechanisation in Bangladesh-The Future” organised by USAID-funded Feed the Future Bangladesh Cereal Systems Initiative for South Asia-Mechanization and Extension Activity (CSISA-MEA) and Bangladesh Agricultural University at Pan Pacific Sonargaon, Dhaka.

“Private banks and financial institutions should come forward to facilitate farmers with modern machinery and development organisations can play a role to teach proper use and maintenance of modern

tools,” he said.

He said the country has also made great strides in the food processing sector which would enable smooth commercialisation of agriculture and increase profitability.

In the workshop, experts said Bangladesh mechanised many aspects of agricultural production since the early 1980s when use of manual labour and animal power were common.

There is, though, still a long way to go before agriculture in Bangladesh is appropriately mechanised, they said.

For example, almost all of the rice transplanted on 11.5 million hectares of land and the 50 million tonnes of rice harvested each year are done manually.

They said farmers however find it challenging to find and afford labour for this purpose.

The private sector has responded to this through the aggressive promotion and sale of mini combine harvesters and rice transplanters while the government provides subsidies to enable their purchase, they added.

The workshop also addressed constraints to accelerating the pace of mechanisation and the required

changes in government and private sector policies that would make that happen.

The experts said farm machinery can foster employment and enable establishing related businesses with the participation of rural women and youth.

Highlighting the success in Bangladesh’s agriculture sector, Md Benojir Alam, director general at the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), said the country now holds a dominant position in the world in agricultural production.

This includes ranking third in rice production, second in jute production, first in jute export, third in vegetable and onion production and fourth in tea production, he said.

He said the existing labour shortage resulted from a shift of manpower to the industrial sector and future generations were unwilling to get involved in agriculture.

“Daily agricultural wages and per capita income are getting higher and at the farmers’ end, output price has not increased that much,” he said.

During the peak season, daily wages of farm hands increased by 3.5

times in the past 10 years. Against this backdrop, the government undertook mechanisation activities through the DAE in 2010, he said.

Between 2010 and 2012, the 1st phase of a pilot project on mechanisation was implemented at 25 districts. Between 2013 and 2019, the 2nd phase was implemented at 64 districts.

Now the government has taken up a “Farm Mechanisation Project” to supply and use modern agricultural machinery.

The project also aims to prevent crop wastage by 10 per cent to 15 per cent and save time in crop cultivation by 50 per cent and money by 20 per cent.

Md Sayedul Islam, agriculture secretary, Shaikh Mohammad Bokhtiar, executive chairman at Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council, Muhammad Khan, acting director, Office of Economic Growth (USAID); Timothy J Krupnik, country representative, International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center Bangladesh; and Md Monjurul Alam, Department of Farm Power and Machinery, BAU, were present.

Prodhan re-elected PDBL chairman

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Md Ataur Rahman Prodhan, chief executive officer and managing director of Sonali Bank Ltd, has been re-elected as chairman of Primary Dealers Bangladesh Ltd (PDBL) for a one-year term.



The board of directors re-elected Prodhan at the PDBL’s 13th annual general meeting held at Sara Tower in Motijheel, Dhaka on Sunday, a press release said.

They also re-elected Syed Mahbubur Rahman, managing director and chief executive officer (CEO) of Mutual Trust Bank, as vice-chairman of PDBL for the same period.

A 15-member board of directors of PDBL was formed in the meeting. CEO and managing directors of public and private banks have been included as members of the board.

Japan presses UAE to pump more oil

AFP, Dubai

Japan on Sunday urged the United Arab Emirates to pump more oil to calm markets rocked by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the latest major consumer to lobby Gulf producers.

The plea by Japan’s Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi came during meetings with Emirati officials which coincided with a visit by Germany’s economy minister, three weeks into the Russian offensive.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson also flew to the UAE and Saudi Arabia to push for more oil this week in a bid to ease prices of over \$100 a barrel and secure non-Russian supplies.

Hayashi asked “the UAE to contribute to the stabilisation of the international oil market by supplying more oil, securing spare productive capacity as a leading member of OPEC+”.

US, UK officials kick off fresh dialogue on smarter trade ties

REUTERS, Washington

US and British officials will begin two days of meetings in Baltimore on Monday to discuss strengthening trade ties, as the United States and its allies ratchet up pressure on Russia over its war in Ukraine and China for failing to condemn it.

Senior US trade officials described the talks, which include a tour of the port of Baltimore and meetings with US workers and industry executives, as a broad effort to take stock of the \$153 billion bilateral trade relationship, with specific irritants to be set aside and dealt with in separate talks.

Broadband connections

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However, on a year-on-year basis, the number of mobile internet users rose 8.34 per cent in January.

On the other hand, broadband connections have been on the rise since the pandemic surfaced.

The number of clients rose by 10,000 month-on-month in January to 10.10 crore. The number of broadband subscribers rose by 5 per cent year-on-year in January.

Many schools and educational institutions are still availing broadband connections, pushing up the numbers, said Aminul Hakim, former president of the Internet Service Providers Association of Bangladesh (ISPAB).

“In spite of the pandemic situation having improved, many schools, especially

those outside of Dhaka, are now introducing a hybrid system where they take both in person and online classes,” he said.

Hakim, who is the CEO of internet service provider Amber IT, said before the pandemic, 70 per cent of the demand for broadband was from cities like Dhaka, Chattogram and Sylhet.

“Now, over 60 per cent of the new clients come from outside the capital and major cities,” he said, adding that the demand for broadband connections would continue to rise in the coming months.

Posts and Telecommunications Minister Mustafa Jabbar said the main reason was that use of the internet had become a digital necessity for the people.

“People no longer

use the internet only for Facebook or other social media. Now it is essential for many other crucial works and faster internet connections are needed for that,” he said.

The use of broadband internet will rise in the future as the government is expanding optical fiber networks across the country, Jabbar added.

GP, Robi lose customers, Banglalink, Teletalk gain

The number of customers of Robi Axiata, the second largest mobile operator which crossed the 5 crore subscribers landmark in September 2020, grew by 4.9 per cent year-on-year in January to reach 5.35 crore.

During the same month in 2021, it was 5.11 crore.

The operator lost about 1 lakh customers in January

compared to that a month earlier. The operator had lost almost the same number of customers in December last year.

Market leader Grameenphone’s total mobile phone customers jumped 4.11 per cent to 8.30 crore in January 2022 from 7.75 crore in January 2021.

However, the operator lost over 4 lakh customers in January this year compared to that a month earlier.

The operator had lost another 5 lakh customers in December last year compared to the preceding month.

Third-placed Banglalink grew its customer numbers by 5.35 per cent year-on-year in January to reach 3.74 crore.

The operator added about 2 lakh new customers in January compared to

that a month earlier.

The number of customers of state-owned Teletalk, which lags behind all the private operators by a big margin, rose 24 per cent year-on-year in January to reach 67 lakh.

Teletalk added about 1 lakh customers in January compared to that a month earlier.

Md Shahab Uddin, managing director Teletalk Bangladesh, said they had expanded their network in remote areas, including haors and Chittagong Hill Tracts, and that contributed to its rising customer base.

“We are running a project titled expansion of the Teletalk network up to rural areas including 5G readiness and we will take the high-speed internet to union levels with this project,” he added.

Bangladesh Auto Biscuit and Bread Manufacturers Association.

Ghulam Rahman, president of the Consumers Association of Bangladesh, says businesspeople have to behave responsibly considering the interests of consumers.

“Otherwise, the interests of consumers will not be protected. If anyone cheats consumers, they should be brought under the law.”

Monjur Mohammad Shariar, director for administration and finance of the Directorate of National Consumers Right Protection, urged companies to look at the interest of customers since they are at the centre of all business activities.

Food packs slim down

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The price of the 150g Bombay Sweets Dalmoth Chanachur pack has been revised upwards to Tk 45 from Tk 40. It went up to Tk 80 from Tk 60 for the 300g pack.

“Still, we are finding it difficult to cope with the rising costs. We are running the business at break-even,” said Khurshid Ahmad Farhad, general manager of Bombay Sweets.

Premium Sweets plans to raise the price by 10 to 20 per cent on average from this month.

“If we don’t adjust the price, we will not be able to offer quality products. And if we can’t ensure the quality, our reputation will

be dented,” said Mahbubur Rahman Bakul, head of corporate affairs of Premium Sweets.

“Under the current circumstances, there is no other option but to increase the price.”

On average, the price of every bakery item at Yousuf Bakery & Confectionery has gone up by Tk 5 to Tk 10, said Ishrat Jahan, one of the partners of the Johnson Road outlet of the bakery.

An executive of a multinational food company says they are observing the situation and have not decided yet whether it would go for resizing the packs or increasing the price.

Desh Bondhu Bread &

Biscuit Factory in Mirpur-7 makes items largely targeting the low-income groups.

“So, we can’t raise the prices if we want to,” said Md Ashraf Alam, proprietor of the company.

Earlier a 500g packet of dry cake was sold for Tk 90. Now, he has brought it down to 400g but the price has remained unchanged.

Similarly, the 500g toast pack has been resized to a 450g pack. On average, the pack sizes of all products has been slashed by 50 to 100 grammes, Alam said.

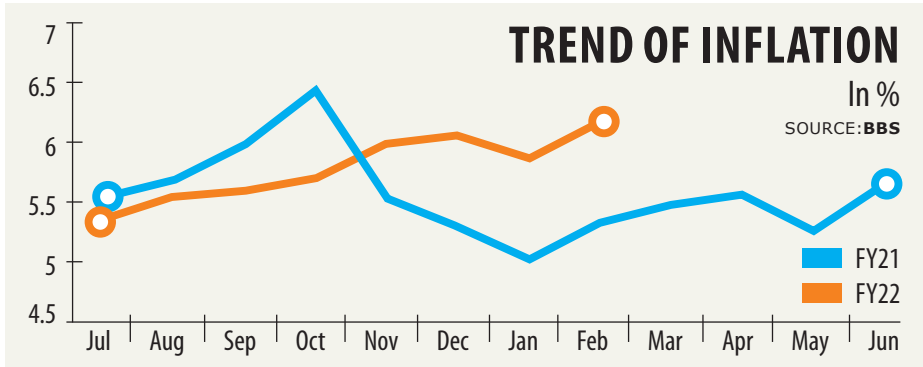
According to the businessman, in 2020, the price of a container of palm

oil weighing 182kgs to 184kgs was Tk 12,000. Now, it is more than Tk 30,000.

He used to buy a 16kg carton of Dalda, a vegetable oil, at Tk 1,500-1600, which now costs Tk 3,000. The price of sugar has surged to Tk 3,700-3,800 per 50kg bag from Tk 2,200-2,500 previously.

Besides, his monthly gas bill rose from Tk 70,000 to Tk 1.2 lakh. He has to pay Tk 9,000 in monthly wage to a worker now against Tk 6,000 before the pandemic.

“The price of all of the raw materials has gone up. So, companies either have to resize the packs or adjust the prices to stay afloat,” said Shafiqur Rahman Bhuiyan, president of the



Inflation climbs to 16-month

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“We raised this concern a long ago. At least we know the basket of the food items in BBS’s calculation of food inflation and the prices of food items we can guess based on our day-to-day encounter in the markets.”

“But we don’t know what prices of non-food items are considered! For example, if you consider the rent of a house, the question is which category of house and where is it located?” Raihan asked.

“We need more clarity on this and I hope the BBS will help us in this regard.”

In a Facebook post yesterday, Raihan, also a professor of the economics department at the University of Dhaka, said poor and many middle-

class families were suffering from an unusual spike in the prices of commodities.

“Many families have fallen into poverty for income losses during the pandemic. The price hike has become stumbling blocks for them to recover.”

Citing the spiral in the price of import-based commodities, Prof Raihan says the prices climbed much higher than the rational level.

Higher prices in the international market, mismatch in supply and demand, and weak market monitoring have fueled the profiteering tendency among businesses, thus contributing to the unusual price escalation, he added.

He, however, lauded the

government efforts aimed at distributing certain commodities among one crore families, but added that many families still remain out of the list.

“The coverage should be expanded,” said Prof Raihan, calling on the government to set up sales centres at various places of the country.

“At the same time, the scope for buying commodities at subsidised prices should be continued for those who have not received cards from the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh.”

CPD’s Khan says inflation is much higher in reality and urged the government to take measures to provide relief to the low-income people.

FBCCI for mandatory TIN

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The trade body is also expected to suggest abolishing income tax on turnover or sales, reasoning that income tax was impossible only on a taxable entity.

Besides, it may

recommend establishing Large Taxpayer Units (LTU) in every large tax zone, and keeping a system in place so that enterprises would automatically be included in the LTU if their turnover crosses a certain limit.

The products most used by low-income people, namely daily commodities, transportation, essential goods, waste management, recycling, and so on, should be free of value added tax and supplementary duty, the FBCCI said.