

DAE looks north to expand soybean farming

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The Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) has taken the initiative to expand soybean cultivation in northern Bangladesh in order to meet the country's growing demand for edible oil.

Citing data from the commerce ministry, DAE sources said Bangladesh produces just two lakh tonnes of edible oil each year against an annual requirement of 22 lakh tonnes, which is met through imports.

In the primary stage, the DAE plans to help cultivate soybean on 33 hectares of land in northern districts such as Rangpur to produce 66 tonnes of seeds that can be pressed to make edible oil.

After gauging initial results, the DAE hopes to bring more land under soybean cultivation next year, according to the government body's regional office, which comprises Rangpur, Gaibandha, Nilphamari, Kurigram and Lalmonirhat.

Kamrul Hasan, agriculture officer of Nilphamari sadar upazila, said they encourage farmers to cultivate soybean by arranging workshops and providing seeds, fertilisers and pesticides for free.

"Besides, our field officers are monitoring the situation all the time," he added.

Emdad Hossain Sheikh, additional director of the regional DAE, said that boosting soybean cultivation in Bangladesh would require developing a good marketing network and modern edible oil extraction facilities within the reach of farmers.

"And we are working to realise these needs" he added.

During a visit to soybean fields in Rangpur and Nilphamari, this correspondent found that the plant grew well in the area thanks to suitable soil and weather conditions.

Dinesh Chandra, a farmer in Rangpur's Gangachara upazila, said farmers are always looking for new crops such as soybean to secure better benefits for their work.

Echoing the same, Hamida Begum, a farmer of Pirganj upazila, said farmers would be more inclined to grow soybean if the government ensures goods prices after harvest.



A sea of soybean plants are seen in a field at Char Amanullah union of Rangpur's Subarnachar upazila. Farmers in the region are worried about being able to recover production costs, let alone make a profit, due to a recent outbreak of hairy caterpillars, which prevent the plants from blooming by eating its leaves and stems.

PHOTO: ANWARUL HAIDER

Soybean oil solely off foreign seeds

Local seeds used in poultry, fish feed

AKANDA MUHAMMAD JAHID

Many of you, who know about the cultivation of soybean in Bangladesh, might think that the production of the oilseed contributes to meeting the country's demand for edible oil to some extent.

Actually, not a single drop of oil is produced from soybean seeds cultivated in the country.

Data from the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) showed that 1.4 lakh tonnes of soybean seed were produced on an average every year in the country. But all the seeds were used to produce feed for poultry and fish as there is no crushing facility at local levels.

However, a few companies do crush soybean seeds but only after importing those from different countries.

Taslim Shahriar, senior assistant general manager of the Meghna Group of Industries, said local seed crushing mills do not use domestically grown soybean to extract edible oil. The soybeans are mainly used by mills to cater to the feed industry, he said.

Millers do not buy the local seeds as the output volume is not worthwhile to crush, said Biswajit Saha, director for corporate and regulatory affairs at City Group, which also extracts soybean oil from seeds alongside refining the edible oil.

According to the DAE, 1.35 lakh tonnes of soybean seed were produced in fiscal year 2020-21, which was 8 per cent less than the previous year's production.

However, the DAE estimates production of 1.39 lakh tonnes of the oilseed from 79,100 hectares of land this season.

The cultivation period runs from mid-December to late April.

Last season, farmers cultivated 78,700 hectares of land in the country.

Some 85 per cent of the country's soybean is cultivated solely in Laxmipur. This season, 38,000 hectares of land were cultivated in the district, 5 per cent less than that in the previous season.

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The second highest amount of land, 14,000 hectares, was cultivated in Noakhali, according to the local DAE office.

Experts said despite the huge market demand, bright prospects and low cost, soybean cultivation has not expanded due to a lack of government steps, publicity and seed storage facilities; an unstable market and a dearth of crushing facilities.

But if soybean production can be increased, it will be possible to save a huge amount of foreign currency alongside meet local demand for the edible oil as the oilseed is the sole raw material for producing soybean oil, they said.

The country imports around 24 lakh tonnes of edible oil per year spending about \$4.32 billion as per the current rate in the international market, said Biswajit Saha.

Of the amount, around 10 lakh tonnes are soybean oil while the rest is palm oil.

Meanwhile, 14 per cent of the soybean oil is produced crushing soybean seeds which is imported from different countries, according to millers.

In recent months, the prices of edible oil, especially soybean oil, went beyond the capacity of the low and middle-income groups, who were reeling from the onslaught of the Covid-19 pandemic.

As the Russia-Ukraine war began, price of the cooking ingredient went up to Tk 180 per litre, breaking records of recent history, and the issue of soybean and other oil seed production came into focus of the policymakers.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina recently said more soybean and sunflower should be cultivated.

But agriculture experts said although farmers initially become interested in soybean cultivation due to the low cost and easy cultivation method, in the long run, they start to lose interest due to multiple challenges.

A top official of the DAE told The Daily Star that there was no seed crushing facilities at the local levels. This is the major barrier to the expansion of soybean cultivation, the official said.

Md Muzibul Haque, supply chain specialist of Solidaridad Network Asia, said the unavailability of high yielding seed varieties was also a big problem.

Other problems include a lack of skills of farmers, absence of seed drying and preservation systems, an unstable market dominated by middlemen and absence of incentives for farmers, Haque said.

Soybean farmers in a hairy situation

Growers in Noakhali fear massive losses for pest attacks

ANWARUL HAIDER

Soybean growers in Subarnachar upazila of Noakhali are deeply concerned about incurring heavy losses this year as their fields are being attacked by a surge of hairy caterpillars, locally known as bichha poka.

The threat of a pest epidemic is particularly high right now as insecticides are having little effect in controlling the menace while the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) is not providing much cooperation in this regard, farmers said.

According to the DAE office in Noakhali, about 7,200 hectares of land across six unions of Subarnachar upazila will be brought under soybean cultivation this planting season, which began mid-December last year and will conclude in late April, to produce around 21,600 tonnes of oilseed.

During a visit to 10 different soybean fields in Char Amanullah union, this correspondent found that many of the plants were damaged by hairy caterpillars, which feed on low leaves and stems.

Once the insects infect a plant, its leaves become porous, turn brown and eventually die.

Nareesh Mahajan, a resident of Char Amanullah, said he cultivated soybean on five acres of land for Tk 1 lakh, much of which was funded by non-government organisations and local moneylenders.

"I was expecting a yield of about 1,500 kilogrammes of seed per acre but now the whole field is infested," he added.

Mahajan went on to say that local DAE officials are yet to visit the area and provide advice on what kind of insecticides can be applied to protect their crops.

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Kiran Chandra Das, another farmer in the union, said it would be near impossible to make a profit this year as the attack of hairy caterpillars will make it difficult to even recover production costs.

"Still though, no one from the DAE has come to visit," he added.

Md Shahidul Haque, deputy director of the DAE in Noakhali, said he did not know about the situation but is now looking into it.

When contacted, Harunur Rashid, agriculture officer of Subarnachar upazila, outright denied allegations of their failure to address the issue.

"I and the assistant agriculture officers regularly visits the field but no one told me about this matter," he said.

Pointing to how high temperatures during the day followed by cool, foggy nights are the perfect breeding conditions for leaf-eating insects, Rashid blamed the current weather for the rising number of pests.

"But the crops can be easily protected if quality insecticides are properly applied," he said.

Many farmers buy low quality insecticides that they dilute in large quantities of water before applying them to plants. "As such, the insects do not die," Rashid added.

A total of around 1.35 lakh tonnes of soybean seeds were produced in Bangladesh in fiscal 2020-21, as per DAE data.

This year though, the DAE estimates that about 1.39 lakh tonnes of the oilseed will be produced from 79,100 hectares of land across the country, mainly Laxmipur and Noakhali.



War could halve 2022 global trade growth: WTO

AFP, Geneva

Russia's war in Ukraine could almost halve world trade growth this year and drag down global GDP growth too, the World Trade Organisation projected Monday.

The WTO said that the Russian invasion had not only created a humanitarian crisis of "immense proportions" but had also dealt a "severe blow" to the global economy.

It also said that in the longer term, the conflict could even spark a disintegration of the global economy into separate blocs.

The Geneva-based global trade body issued its first analysis of the impact of the war ahead of its annual world trade forecast report on Tuesday.

It said that while the shares of Russia and Ukraine in overall world trade and output are relatively small, they are important suppliers of essential products, notably food and energy.

"Using a global economic simulation model, the secretariat projects that the crisis could lower global GDP growth by 0.7 to 1.3 percentage points, bringing growth to somewhere between 3.1 per cent and 3.7 per cent for 2022," the WTO said.

"The model also projects that global trade growth this year could be cut almost in half from the 4.7 per cent the WTO forecasted last October to between 2.4 per cent and three per cent."

Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24 and the war is grinding toward its seventh week.

The WTO said that some regions would be more strongly affected by the war than others.



A cargo ship filled with containers moves through New York Harbour as it heads out to the Atlantic ocean. While the shares of Russia and Ukraine in overall world trade and output are relatively small, they are important suppliers of essential products, notably food and energy, the WTO said.

PHOTO: AFP/FILE

Nokia to stop doing business in Russia

REUTERS, Stockholm

Telecoms equipment maker Nokia is pulling out of the Russian market, its CEO told Reuters, going a step further than rival Ericsson, which said on Monday it was indefinitely suspending its business in the country.

Hundreds of foreign companies are cutting ties with Russia following its February 24 invasion of Ukraine and after unprecedented Western sanctions against Moscow.

While several sectors, including telecoms, have been exempted from some sanctions on humanitarian or related grounds, Nokia said it had decided quitting Russia was the only option.

"We just simply do not see any possibilities to continue in the country under the current circumstances," Chief Executive Pekka Lundmark said in an interview.