



A locomotive is seen undergoing maintenance at the central workshop of Bangladesh Railway in Parbatipur upazila of Dinajpur. If the workshop could operate at full capacity, the number of engines being serviced each year would easily double, officials say. PHOTO: KONGKON KARMAKER

Locomotive workshop facing worker, fund shortages

KONGKON KARMAKER

Although Bangladesh Railway has expanded its efforts to provide rail transport in more areas of the country, its central locomotive workshop in Parbatipur upazila of Dinajpur is unable to operate at full force owing to a shortage of workers and funds.

Previously, a large number of locomotives would undergo maintenance and overhauling at workshop, which is the biggest of its kind in Bangladesh.

Now though, the fund and manpower shortage are restricting the number of locomotives being brought in and as a result, many engines are being operated without the required servicing, according to an official seeking anonymity.

Besides, most of the machinery used at the workshop has become obsolete for overuse, he said.

The dearth of workers and funds comes at a time when Bangladesh Railway has been increasing the number of railroads to expand its transport capacity.

In fiscal 2012-13, the combined length of railroads in the country added up to 2,877 kilometres while it is 3,093 kilometres at present.

The government listed rail transport as a priority sector in its 8th Five-Year Plan, 2nd Perspective Plan and Vision 2021 while also allocating more budget for the development of railways in the current fiscal compared to previous years, as per the Bangladesh Economic Review-2022.

In addition, around 287 railroads have been converted into dual gauge tracks while 74 locomotives and 20 diesel multiple unit (DMU) trains were procured.

The central locomotive workshop has been providing its services with just 33 per cent of its full workforce, railway officials say.

The erstwhile government of Hossain

Mohammad Ershad had taken the initiative to set up the workshop, known as Keloka, at Rampur Union of Parbatipur. After acquiring around 111 acres of land in the region, it was finally set up in 1992 next to the Parbatipur Saidpur highway at a cost of Tk 203 crore.

At present, there are around 294

“It has been left in a seriously neglected condition,” an official said.

Echoing the same, an engineer at Keloka said it has become very difficult to overhaul or conduct general servicing on an engine amid the current situation.

The workshop is comprised of 11 departments that collectively provide

Most machinery used at Keloka, including spare parts, are no longer in usable condition, forcing mechanics to implement makeshift solutions.

If it is no possible to manufacture spares locally, then the parts need to be imported.

However, the shortage of funds is delaying the import process, officials say.

This year, Keloka got a fund allocation of Tk 6 crore while it was Tk 63 crore in fiscal 2021-22 against a demand of Tk 85 crore.

Last year, Keloka had a target to overhaul around 22 engines and conduct general maintenance on another 53, but only 19 were given the services.

“We can currently overhaul around 20 engines each year but the number would double if the empty posts are filled,” a mechanic said.

Rafiqul Islam, chief executive of the central locomotive workshop, said the last time workers were recruited was back in 2013.

However, diploma holding engineers of different educational institutions, including the Bangladesh University of Engineering Technology, are completing their internships at the factory, he added.

Islam went on to say that Bangladesh Railway has plans to set up a similar factory elsewhere in the country. Other than Keloka, there are two more engineering department operated by Bangladesh Railway – the Syedpur Railway Factory in Nilphamari and Pahartoli Carriage and Wagon Factory in Chattogram.

Both factories are working with around 40 per cent of their full workforce.

Experts at Keloka successfully repaired a DMU train at the end of last year, helping Bangladesh Railway save huge funds after the supplier company of China demanded a repair charge equal to the purchase price.



locomotives operating across Bangladesh, of which 108 are broad gauge while 186 are metre gauge.

Lasting for about 20 years, 119 of these locomotives, including 55 broad gauge and 64 metre gauge engines, have already exceeded their lifespan.

In fact, six of them are around 67 years old but are still able to operate on different routes thanks to routine maintenance and overhauling every six years at the central locomotive workshop.

Now though, their survival has come into question as service station lacks the required workforce and funds.

some 559 posts, of which around 67 per cent are vacant for now.

Officials say the reluctance of Bangladesh Railway to recruit fresh workers alongside the retirement of older ones is increasing the number of empty posts each year.

On condition of anonymity, an expert mechanic at the workshop said recruiting new workers would solve the problem almost instantly.

It currently takes from six months to a year to overhaul each engine with the current workforce but the problem does not stop there, he added.

Jashore farmers set to export cabbage for first time

Shipment going to Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan



MOHSIN MILON, Benapole

The farmers in Jashore Sadar upazila are all set to export 20 lakh pieces of cabbage to Malaysia, Singapore and Taiwan from the region for the first time.

The growers have already shipped 22,000 kilogrammes of the winter vegetable to Malaysia, according to the farmers and officials of the local agriculture office.

The rest of the cabbage, locally known as Badhacopi, will be exported to Singapore and Taiwan in phases by the end of February, they said.

About 150 farmers of Haibatpur, Churamankati, Lebulla and Kashimnagar areas in Jashore Sadar upazila are producing the cabbage through contract farming with different non government organisations in association with the local office of the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE).

The vegetable export will benefit many farmers in the area, as the shipment began at a time when the beginning of the peak season started cutting prices of cabbage and other vegetables in the region, said Abul Kasem, a farmer of Lebulla Village.

Abdul Latif, another farmer of the area, said they are exporting each cabbage weighing about one and a half kilos as per the requirements of the importing companies.

Sheikh Sajjad Hossain, an agriculture officer at the DAE in Jashore Sadar upazila, said the upazila agriculture office is directly monitoring whether vegetables are produced maintaining international standards.

The commercial export of cabbage from Jashore is a matter of pride, he added.

Apart from cabbage, farmers are also preparing to export brinjal, cauliflower, tomato, beans, bitter gourd, papaya, potato and other vegetables in phases, he said.

Ahmed Zaker & Co banned from auditing activities

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Ahmed Zaker & Co Chartered Accountants has been banned from auditing all listed companies and mutual funds as the accountancy firm did not attend any enquiry hearing of four mutual funds of UFS Asset Management.

The Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission (BSEC) shared the information yesterday through an order.

The BSEC said the audit firm did not attend the hearing for the enquiry of UFS IBBL Shariah Unit Fund, UFS Popular Life Unit Fund, UFS Padma Life Islamic Unit Fund, and UFS Bank Asia Unit Fund.

Universal Financial Solutions Ltd was the fund manager of the funds and Ahmed Zaker & Co was the external auditor.

The enquiry committee found the evidence of some unprofessional activities conducted by the audit firm, the stockmarket regulator said.

UFS Asset Management has embezzled Tk 158 crore in investors' funds from the mutual funds.

Therefore, the order was issued, where it was said: “Ahmed Zaker & Co Chartered Accountants shall not be allowed to conduct any further audit for any mutual fund under the UFS, and also shall not be allowed to be the auditor of any mutual funds and listed company till further instruction of the commission.”

UK inflation edges down but food prices surge

REUTERS, London

British inflation eased last month after hitting a 41-year high in October, offering some comfort to the Bank of England, but the pressure on households remained intense as food and drink prices rose at the fastest pace since 1977.

Annual consumer price inflation fell to 10.5 per cent in December from November's 10.7 per cent, the Office for National Statistics said on Wednesday, a drop in line with economists' forecasts in a Reuters poll.

However, while lower prices for petrol and clothing pushed down the headline rate, the cost of food and non-alcoholic beverages was 16.8 per cent higher than a year earlier, the sharpest increase since September 1977, led by eggs, milk and cheese.

The Bank of England forecast in November that headline CPI would drop from a peak of 11.1 per cent last October to around 5 per cent by the end of 2023 as energy prices stabilise.

But policymakers have warned of continued upward pressure on inflation from a tight jobs market and other factors, and financial markets expect the central bank to raise its main interest rate to 4 per cent on February 2 from 3.5 per cent.

“The lower overall (CPI) rate ... may reduce the risk of a wage-price spiral, but these figures suggest the BoE's job is not yet done,” HSBC senior economist Liz Martins said.

Sterling strengthened against the US dollar after the data.



Shoppers walk past stores in Camden Market in London. While lower prices for petrol and clothing pushed down the inflation rate, the cost of food and non-alcoholic beverages was 16.8 per cent higher than a year earlier, the sharpest increase since September 1977. PHOTO: AFP

Eurozone could avoid recession

French central bank chief says

REUTERS

The eurozone economy is performing better than feared just a few months ago and the 20-nation bloc could even avoid a recession, French central bank chief Francois Villeroy de Galhau said on Wednesday.

“If I look at the situation from Europe - it's probably the same in the US, more or less - activity is more resilient than expected, and we should avoid a recession this year, which I wouldn't have (expected) three months ago,” Villeroy told a World Economic Forum panel in Davos.

He added that inflation will likely peak in the first half of the year, with underlying figures hitting their high only after headline figures, and this battle against rapid price growth is not yet won.