



Farmers bring maize, the second-biggest crop in Bangladesh, from fields to an open place to dry them. The photo was taken from Kamarjani char under Gaibandha Sadar upazila last year. Maize cultivation has grown in northern districts in the past one decade.

PHOTO: MOSTAFA SHABU

# Tk 209cr project to boost char crop output

MD ASADUZ ZAMAN

The government has initiated an agricultural project at a cost of Tk 209 crore with the aim to increase production of crops in char areas by expanding the use of modern technologies.

The Executive Committee of the National Economic Council approved the project in a meeting chaired by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina last Tuesday.

The planning commission said the project would contribute positively to crop diversity and agricultural commercialisation while also bolstering food security, national nutritional needs and socio-economic development.

The Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), under the agriculture ministry, will implement the project in 121 upazilas across 34 districts by June 2027.

According to the project proposal, the main activities include skills development trainings for farmers, field days, seminars

and workshops, technology exhibitions, distribution of solar light traps and construction of facilities for farmers.

Drought-resilient and short-duration crop varieties alongside suitable agricultural technologies will be employed in the char areas, which are basically low-lying islands naturally formed by silt from rivers flowing into the Bay of Bengal.

The project aims to increase yields of sugarcane, guava, mango, watermelon, sweet orange, corn, sweet potato, pepper, jute, seeds of black cumin, sunflower and mustard and legumes including lentils, soybean and mung beans.

There are a lot of fallow land or "problem areas" in char areas which are usually used to grow one crop a year, said Prof Jahangir Alam Khan, an agriculture economist.

The national average for a piece of land is around two crops a year or 200 percent, he told The Daily Star yesterday.

The DAE aims to increase crop intensity

in char areas to anywhere from 140 percent to 145 percent using advanced agricultural technologies.

If the authorities can adopt new technologies in char areas, it will

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help increase the overall production, added Khan, also a former president of Bangladesh Agricultural Economists' Association.

There is little income generating

opportunity for the lower-income population usually found in char areas and this project, if implemented properly, will help them become more financially solvent and ensure food security, he said.

"The project is based on prioritising people in char areas," said Md Sayduzzaman, division chief of the agriculture, water resources and rural institutions division of the planning commission.

"On receiving the proposal (from the DAE), we scrutinised it and scrapped some components," he said.

For example, the commission rejected a proposal to purchase jeeps and double-cabin vehicles. It also raised questions about printing and binding costs amounting to Tk 80 lakh, which the DAE later revised to Tk 40 lakh.

The planning commission also asked the DAE to introduce biodegradable trays for saplings instead of plastic trays to reduce pollution.

## Dairy Board Bill gives farmers hope

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Dairy farming in Bangladesh will get a boost once a dairy development board comes into being, hoped farmers yesterday regarding a bill being recently placed in parliament.

The Bangladesh Dairy Development Board Bill 2023 aims to increase production of milk and milk products and ensure quality production and marketing.

The fisheries and livestock ministry placed the bill last week seeking to facilitate establishment of commercial farms and to take steps to ensure production of safe milk and dairy products.

Once the law comes about, the government is expected to form a 19-member panel for the board with a minister as its chairman.

The dairy sector flourished in India, Pakistan and various advanced economies following recommendations of their boards. "We, farmers, will be able to contribute more," said Mohammad Imran Hossain, president of Bangladesh Dairy Farmers Association (BDFA).

"It is very important for dairy farming to flourish in Bangladesh," said Shah Emran, general secretary of the BDFA, a platform of 18,000 farmers.

He cited the examples of countries that excelled in milk and beef production by setting up a separate board for dairy development. "We have been demanding the establishment of a board for a long time," he said.

In Bangladesh, there are about 2.34 crore cattle, according to Emran.

Bangladesh is lagging behind when it comes to dairy, said FH Ansarey, president of the agribusiness division of ACI Ltd.

"The good news is that there is a trend of people taking up farming. In this situation, a dairy board will be able to provide necessary support to growers at every stage and work to promote production of diversified milk products," he said.

Bangladesh has a large number of cattle but milk yield per cow is low, said Kamruzzaman Kamal, director for marketing at Pran-RFL Group, which processes milk.

Bangladesh has the opportunity to develop its dairy sector, he said.

"Development of poultry and fisheries are two big examples. These sectors have flourished because of policy support. We can reduce our imports by nurturing the growth of the local dairy industry," he said.

## US, KSA, India discuss possible rail, port deal

REUTERS, Washington

The US, Saudi Arabia, India and other nations are discussing a possible infrastructure deal that could reconfigure trade between the Gulf and South Asia, linking Middle Eastern countries by railways and connecting to India by port, according to US officials aware of the conversations.

The talks, which have also included the United Arab Emirates and Europe, may or may not yield a concrete result in time for an announcement on the sidelines of this week's Group of 20 (G20) leaders meeting, the people said.

## Rough sea delays Pangaon Express's

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rescue firm to expedite the operation.

In the meeting, the rescue firm assured the CPA that they would start shifting the containers onboard from September 10, aiming to reduce the ship's weight.

However, officials of the salvage firm told The Daily Star that they needed one more week to start the job as the sea was still rough.

Around 70 per cent of the work of passing wire ropes beneath the ship is complete, which is required to steady it as part of rescue efforts, they said.

A relatively calm sea is needed to start shifting the onboard containers with the help of barge mounted cranes, officials added.

Fearing that at least 22 loaded containers might have washed away during this period, officials of the ship's operating firm said the 50 remaining containers carrying heavy items, including steel goods, which were stacked inside the hatch, were likely to still be on board.

They believed a portion of these steel goods could be recovered for use.

The Pangaon Express, owned by the CPA, was transporting 72 import-laden containers from the Chattogram port to Dhaka's Pangaon Inland Container Depot when it tilted to one side due to strong waves around 12 nautical miles off Bhasanchar on July 6 noon, causing three containers to fall into the sea.

As water started entering the vessel, crewmembers managed to navigate the ship around 4 to 5 nautical miles towards the coast.

However, it finally grounded and submerged near Bhasanchar coast.

The ship's private operating firm, Sea Glory Shipping Agency, earlier sought help from the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) to engage its rescue ships Rustam and Hamza, but BIWTA said

it could not rescue the ship due to logistical issues.

Rustam and Hamza are not fit to cross the bay, said Md Sabur Khan, joint director of BIWTA Chattogram.

Sea Glory initially engaged private salvage firm Motaleb Enterprise, but it also did not have the capacity to do the job.

Sea Glory Manager Mainul Hossain said they later approached two other firms, Glasgow Exxon and Prantik Bengal Salvage and Diving.

Exxon demanded a huge amount of money while Prantik opted to wait until October for the sea to calm before initiating rescue operations.

Sea Glory finally signed a Tk 4 crore deal with private firm PS Salvage on July 18 to rescue the ship in 45 days.

Hossain claimed PS Salvage has prior experience of rescuing at least 17 lighter vessels from the same area.

He said the salvage operation faced obstacles and delays as there were cautionary signals every week for the last two months.

Five to six heavy wire ropes must be passed beneath the sunken ship with the help of divers in order to hold the ship, Hossain said. It will be possible to shift the onboard containers from the ship once it is steady, he said.

The containers then need to be shifted to reduce the weight of the ship so that it can be towed to the shore.

Ashraf Alam, managing partner and representative of PS Salvage, said they had so far managed to pass five heavy wire ropes with the help of a winch barge.

Claiming to finish 70 percent of the rescue operation, Alam hoped to start lifting the containers within a week.

Informing that onboard containers could be shifted with barge-mounted cranes, Alam said a calm sea and favourable weather were pre-requisites for the job. Otherwise, the barge carrying the crane may face a similar accident.

## Facilitate vision

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engine displacement capacities and the demand is rising, he said.

Local entrepreneurs should focus on the export market, Khan, also the chairman of Runner Group, told The Daily Star in an interview.

His comment comes against the backdrop of a home ministry meeting on Thursday approving the manufacture and local sale of motorcycles of up to 350cc, culminating years of negotiations between motorcycle manufacturers and the government.

Cubic capacity (cc) refers to the power output of an engine. It is increased by raising the ratio of air and fuel being compressed in the engine.

Currently, motorcycles with over 165cc engines cannot be manufactured or imported for the local market.

However, manufacturers can export motorcycles with engines of up to 500cc, according to Motorcycle Industry Development Policy 2018.

As per the recent approval, only parts for motorcycles of up to 350cc can be imported and they must be assembled locally for sale in the domestic market. The Ministry of Commerce is expected to formulate a policy in this regard.

Global motorcycle sales amounted to \$75.63 billion in 2022, according to research firm Fortune Business Insights.

The market is projected to grow from \$79.57 billion in 2023 to \$124.09 billion by 2030 exhibiting a compound annual growth rate of 6.6 percent during the forecast period, it says.

The government is gradually moving towards setting up a motorcycle industry in the country, said Khan.

There are many barriers for an industry to move forward and approvals like that of Thursday will remove the barriers one by

one, he said.

On popular claims that the possibility of accidents goes up with use of engines of higher cubic capacities, he assured that there was no such connection.

Accidents are not associated with a rise in cc, rather speed is the number one cause of accidents, followed by a lack of fitness of the vehicle, said Khan.

Speed limits should be fixed and enforced for every road and this alone can prevent most road accidents, he said.

Much depends on how strict the government can be in this regard, said Khan.

"Our mission has not yet been accomplished that much. If we don't go far and out, we might get by taking different decisions but we will not be able to enjoy all the benefits," he said.

Global political and economic changes are coming. In the next 20 years the world will see a huge positive change in the automobile industry, he said.

So, Bangladesh has to work with a vision from now on. If the country cannot avail the opportunities, a lot will be lost, he added.

## SBAC Bank MD resigns

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Bank Chairman Abu Zafar Mohammad Shofiuddin told The Daily Star.

Last week, Padma Bank Managing Director Tarek Reaz Khan resigned from his post citing personal reasons.

Currently, SBAC Bank, which started its journey in April 2013, has 88 branches, 25 sub-branches and 62 ATM booths.

As of March this year, the bank's outstanding loans totalled Tk 7,860 crore, while non-performing loans stood at Tk 396 crore.

## Investors raise flags

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Sheikh Amin Uddin, a director of Akij Group, said they had applied to Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company for gas connection after setting up a CNG plant in Tangail 13 years ago. During this time, Akij Group has extended the bank guarantee twice and revised the security money four times.

But, Akij Group still did not get the connection despite querying the offices of various officials, including the managing director of Titas.

He complained that they had invested \$1 million in the CNG plant and the machinery was imported and set up, but production could not start due to the non-availability of gas.

In reply, Swagatam Kumar Saha, a deputy general manager at Titas, said that although they recognised the need to get a gas connection, they were contending with a supply shortage.

He assured that gas connection activities would resume soon as Petrobangla is trying to import more liquefied natural gas (LNG) to overcome the crisis.

Mahboob also advised the director of Akij Group to come to the Bida office on Sunday, adding: "Come to Bida tomorrow and we will work on the matter."

BCCCI President Gazi Golam Murtuza said entrepreneurs had to wait for a long time to get work permit extensions, breeding frustration.

He said many questions and inquiries were constantly coming from investors. "There is a lot of frustration among them. Chinese investment in Bangladesh will increase if their problems are solved swiftly."

Avijit Chowdhury, executive member of the Bida, said: "We know that entrepreneurs face many problems in terms of taxes and customs, while buying land and getting gas and electricity

connections after registering investment proposals. To solve those problems, we have introduced an aftercare service. We have already solved many problems of various companies."

He said a huge amount of Chinese investment was required to meet the challenges of Bangladesh that the country may face after graduating from the group of least-developed countries.

"Foreign investors now can come to Bangladesh with full security and safety."

BCCCI Secretary General Al Mamun Mridha said that China was the single largest investor in Bangladesh till 2019. Due to Covid and China's zero-Covid policy, Chinese investment has been low for several years.

He added that a lot of investment was coming now and that by increasing Chinese investment, it would be easier to deal with the existing foreign reserve crisis.

Mentioning that Chinese companies deserve praise for human resource development and technology transfer in Bangladesh, he said bilateral trade between Bangladesh and China was \$1.4 billion in 2003.

Today it is worth almost \$25 billion. Investment has also increased significantly over the past 10 years, from \$26 million in 2013 to over \$465 million in 2022.

"In 2016, over \$40 billion was promised to Bangladesh as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. Around \$5 billion has already been disbursed and many projects have been implemented," Mridha said.

He said some milestone projects are about to be inaugurated and work on some projects is proceeding at a rapid pace.

"BCCCI has acted as the strongest catalyst for this huge growth of these trade and investments."