People enjoy the scenic view at a popular tourist spot in Bandarban. Although tourism in the nation is growing fast, the lack of a skilled workforce is the key challenge facing the industry.

PHOTO: STAR/FILE

Lack of skilled manpower key challenge for tourism sector

Stakeholders say at a discussion

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Although the tourism and hospitality management industry in Bangladesh is expanding fast, the lack of a skilled workforce is the key challenge right now, stakeholders said yesterday.

"Bangladesh has huge potential in this sector. It has already focused on creating connectivity and several residential infrastructure and tourism places," said Mohiuddin Helal, chairman of the Tourism and Hospitality Industry Skills Council.

"So, there is no alternative to creating skilled manpower to cope with the challenge," he said.

Many types of workers, including tour guides, travel agents, restaurant personnel, hotel staff and chefs are needed to boost the sector.

"If we want to attract more domestic and foreign tourists, we have to ensure proper management through skilled manpower."

Helal made the comments at a seminar titled "Future Skills, Jobs and Entrepreneurship in Tourism" at the Bangabandhu International Conference Center on the last day of the three-day 10th Asian Tourism Fair.

Parjatan Bichitra organised the fair, where 150 tourism companies from various countries, including Bangladesh, India, China, Nepal, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Dubai, participated.

Helal went on to say that some public and private universities in Bangladesh had opened academic departments on tourism and hospitality management.

"Still, we could not utilise this graduated manpower," he said.

Helal, also chairman of the Asian Tourism Fair and editor of Parjatan Bichitra, suggested designing academic courses with proper correlation.

Alongside local demand, Bangladesh has the potential to export skilled manpower abroad and earn huge amounts of foreign currency, he said.

"In this regard, proper training certification is needed."

Lamenting a scenario in a hotel in Malaysia, Helal said he witnessed Bangladeshi workers being deprived. "Although Bangladeshi workers were more skilled, they were getting almost half of the salary compared to others due to a lack of certification," he said.

"If we want to attract more domestic and foreign tourists, we have to ensure proper management through skilled manpower."

At the event, Mohammed Ali, sous chef at Biman Flight Catering Centre of Biman Bangladesh Airlines, said ensuring safe and healthy food on the dining table was a major challenge in the tourism sector.

After removing barriers related to foreign languages and building confidence, Bangladeshi workers can perform on global platforms, he said.

Md Anwrul Hoque, director of planning and industry linkage at the National Skill Development Authority, said they were coordinating several training programmes targeting the tourism sector.

On the last day of the fair, a number of visitors were seen browsing various packages, discounts and offers tailored for both business-to-business (B2B) enterprises and tourists.

"I came to the fair to get updated information about Umrah," said Abdus Sukur Howlader, a visitor who came from the Fakirapool area in the capital.

"According to my academic assignment, I participated in the fair and availed a lot of information from here," said Abul Hossain Sohel, a student of Tourism and Hospitality at the Daffodil International University.

The fair was open for visitors from 10:00am until 7:00pm every day. The entry fee was Tk 30. However, students enjoyed free admission through online registration.

UK recession risk deepens but consumers stay unfazed

REUTERS, *London*

Britain's economy displayed clear recession signals on Friday, a day after the Bank of England called a halt to its long run of interest rate increases that have turned the tide on inflation but at the expense of a hit to businesses.

A business survey, which the BoE factored into its decision to keep rates on hold, showed companies endured a much tougher September than feared, marked by growing unemployment.

The preliminary reading of the UK S&P Global Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) for the services sector sank to its lowest since the pandemic lockdown of January 2021 and below all forecasts in a Reuters poll of economists.

Aside from during the Covid-19 pandemic, the index last fell this low during the Global Financial Crisis. Its gauge of jobs suffered its biggest fall on record outside of the pandemic.

Sterling was down about 0.4 percent against the US dollar at 1105 GMT, a touch above its lowest since March as investors pondered how long the BoE could stick to its plan to keep interest rates around current levels before cutting them to help the economy. PMIs for the euro zone picked up a little but still suggested a recession was approaching.

A business survey showed companies endured a much tougher September than feared, marked by growing unemployment

A separate survey by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) showed factory output fell and was expected to be stagnant in the remainder of 2023.

"Bouncing along the bottom is likely to be a story which persists for the near term," Martin Beck, chief economic advisor to forecasters the EY ITEM Club, said.

While the full impact of the BoE's 14 back-to-back rate hikes had yet to be felt and the jobs market was weakening, weaker inflation and relief that borrowing costs may have peaked suggested the economy would avoid a serious downturn, Beck said. There were some signs of resilience among consumers alongside the weak readings of business activity.

Official data showed retail sales rose in August, partially recovering from a rain-induced plunge in July, and a measure of consumer confidence climbed to its highest since January 2022.

However, data company S&P Global said its survey was consistent with a drop in quarterly economic output of 0.4 percent.

"The disappointing PMI survey results for September mean a recession is looking increasingly likely in the UK," said Chris Williamson, chief business economist at S&P Global.

Samuel Tombs, an economist with Pantheon Macroeconomics, disagreed, saying wages were finally outpacing inflation, household energy prices were about to fall back further and consumer confidence levels were holding up.

Poor states use food crisis fight to get big power attention at UN

REUTERS, *United Nations*

In his speech opening the annual United Nations gathering of world leaders this week, Secretary-General Antonio Gutteres vowed - to applause - that he would "not give up" trying to get food and fertiliser from Russia and Ukraine to global markets.

After Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022 the United Nations blamed the war for worsening a global food crisis and a new diplomatic frontline emerged, with Moscow and Kyiv fighting to win over those hit hardest: poor and developing countries.

That battle has been at the forefront this week at the high-level UN General Assembly, where the applause for Guterres' remarks on Tuesday underscored the push from those countries, particularly from the Global South, to get big powers to focus on their most important challenges.

"We are no longer willing to come to this annual parade merely to lend our voice to support of this or that global conflict or to condemn whoever from year to year as the new global enemy," said Saint Lucia's Prime Minister Philip Pierre.

"No powerful nation's global agenda is more important than our own," he told the General Assembly.

It is not clear, however, that meetings at the UN this week will yield any quick relief to countries struggling to feed their people - specifically the revival of a landmark deal that had allowed the safe Black Sea export of Ukrainian grain, which Russia quit two months ago.

Guterres this week met separately with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and is also due to meet Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, but with no apparent breakthrough in efforts to revive the deal brokered by the UN and Turkey in July 2022.

The absence of four of the five leaders of the permanent UN Security Council members - US President Joe Biden was the only one attending - has further deepened the skepticism among developing nations.

"That is not how you build trust. That is not how you show solidarity. That is not accountability, and that is not leadership," Malawi's President Lazarus Chakwera told the General Assembly, referring to the absence of the other four leaders.

With geopolitical tensions looming over this week's meetings - especially the rivalries between the United States, Russia and China - developing countries made the most of their position, said Richard Gowan, UN director for the International Crisis Group.

"Developing countries know the US, China and Russia all want their support at the UN They successfully leveraged their new influence to make sure the UN focused on their economic concerns this week," said Gowan.

High on that list of concerns is addressing a global food crisis. Ukraine and Russia are both major grain exporters and Moscow is also a big supplier of fertilizer to the world.

"The world badly needs Ukrainian food and Russian food and fertilisers to stabilise markets and guarantee food security," Guterres told the General Assembly.

Kenya's President William Ruto, speaking at a World Economic Forum in New York, said that the war in Ukraine had "led to soaring prices of essential commodities such as food, fuel and fertiliser, amplifying the plight of vulnerable countries and communities."

Wheat is being harvested near Kramatorsk, in Donetsk region of Ukraine, amid the Russian invasion. Known as the world's "bread basket", Ukraine grows far more wheat than it consumes and it's exports contribute to global food security, especially in African countries, which now fear food shortages.

PHOTO: AFP

Govt's bank

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An official of the finance ministry who works in its budget implementation department says the government's main target is to bring down inflation before the general elections, due in January.

The debt management committee, which comprises officials from both the ministry and the BB, has been instructed not to take any loans from the central bank until inflation falls.

The overall inflation rose 23 basis points to 9.92 percent in August driven by a 12.54 percent surge in food inflation. It was 9.76 percent in the previous month.

The Consumer Price Index rose 9.02 percent in FY23 against the government's revised target of 7.5 percent, the highest in 12 years. This was much higher than the 5-6 percent average inflation seen in the decade before the Russia-Ukraine war.

A dearth of borrowing from the BB has an effect on the non-food inflation and the latest data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics appeared to support that.

Non-food inflation stood at 9.60 percent in June. It fell to 9.47 percent in July and further to 7.95 percent in August.

Economists have long demanded the government stop securing loans from the banking system not only to lower inflation but also to help keep enough liquidity with commercial banks so that entrepreneurs and businesses can access adequate funds.

BB plans

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The economics professor said in the case of reducing NPLs and bringing governance to the banking sector, especially at public banks, the sole authority should be given to the BB.

But the central bank can't monitor public sector banks properly as they operate under two regulators, namely the BB and the finance ministry.

"The central bank will have to assume the leadership in the banking sector."

Stitchwell Designs looking to restart production

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Replying to queries, Hossain said that he had cleared dues of Tk 13 crore to workers in March 2020 before shutting up shop.

He added that he had lost all work orders from buyers, including the likes of Zara, Mango, LIDL, Carrefour, Walmart, Kmart and PDS due to the issue.

One of his buyers from the US claimed compensation amounting to \$2.34 million and burnt his shipment in San Francisco after smelling naphthalene on the goods, Hossain said.

He said he had started the business on the premises in 1992, adding that buyers first began complaining about the foul smell in 2015, around the same time nearby Nazrul and Brothers started production of naphthalene.

He added that he had a lot of work orders from his buyers now and wanted to re-start production in the Tejgaon premises, where his 1,00,000 square feet factory has been lying idle for the past three years.

Currently, he is operating another factory in Tongi, which ships garment items worth more than \$30 million a year.

Before closing down the factory in Tejgaon, he used to ship mainly woven shirts and trousers worth \$20 million. He employed 2,500 workers, but the number fell to 1,500 in the final days of production as work orders dwindled following the complaints.

Hossain said he had sat with Nazrul Islam, chairman of Nazrul and Brothers, several times but those negotiations did not amount to anything.

Both parties are now awaiting a court verdict.

When contacted, Nazrul Islam told The Daily Star that he had been operating his factory in the same place since 1980 while following environmental and other regulations.

He said that he had not been receiving clearance certificates from the Department of Environment for the past three years after Hossain lodged a complaint to the government department.

Islam added that he had already built a new factory at Kanchpur in Narayanganj and is now awaiting the gas connection at the new factory before he relocates.

He said he was moving because the premises in Tejgaon was small and built nearly 44 years ago.

Man-made fibre plant

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He added that they would import raw materials from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Indonesia, China and India, among other nations.

"To ensure the quality of our products, we used equipment from Germany, China and India. Germany-based Oerlikon Group has built the plant," he said.

According to him, the plant will require around 1,500 employees to operate. The man-made fibre industry in Bangladesh had become a key sector in the country's textile and apparel industry and gained importance due to its contribution to the economy by facilitating exports and creating jobs, said Rahman.

The sector in Bangladesh would grow in the coming years, driven by increased demand for synthetic textiles worldwide. Rahman said they would meet the demand for apparel, home textiles, technical textiles, shoes and products in the automotive sector in Bangladesh as import substitutes.