

Meta removes 50 FB accounts, 98 pages linked to AL, CRI

‘Coordinated inauthentic behaviour’ cited as reason

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Meta recently removed at least 50 Facebook accounts and 98 pages linked to the Awami League and the Centre for Research and Information (CRI) for “coordinated inauthentic behaviour”.

In its Adversarial Threat Report on the first quarter of 2024, it said, “Some of these Pages posed as fictitious news entities and some used names of existing news organisations in Bangladesh. A few Pages used the Bangladesh Nationalist Party [BNP] in their name and posted anti-BNP content.”

The report, which was prepared as part of Meta’s routine operations on public threat reporting, was uploaded on Wednesday.

“We view coordinated inauthentic behaviour as coordinated efforts to manipulate public debate for a

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Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina gives relief goods to a victim of cyclone Remal at the Government Mozahar Uddin Biswas Degree College in Patuakhali's Kalapara upazila yesterday.

PHOTO: PTD

Petrol, octane prices hiked by Tk 2.50, diesel 75p

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government has increased diesel price by Tk 0.75 per litre and petrol and octane prices by Tk 2.50 per litre for the month of June.

The new price will be effective from June 1 (12:00am), said a gazette of the Ministry of Power, Energy and Mineral Resources.

As per the gazette, the prices of diesel and kerosene were set at Tk 107 a litre, while the prices of petrol and octane at 127 and Tk 131 a litre, respectively.

Though fuel prices in the international market fell, local prices rose as the taka devalued against the dollar, the gazette explained.

The government has been adjusting local fuel prices in parallel with the international market since March this year.

On February 29, the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) issued a notification on Automatic Fuel Oil Pricing Guidelines.

According to the notification, the prices of all petroleum fuels – petrol, diesel, octane, kerosene, furnace oil, jet fuel, and marine fuels – will be set automatically based on the international market price.

In May, the government hiked diesel price by Tk 1 per litre, and petrol and octane prices by Tk 2.50 per litre.

In April, the price of diesel and kerosene was reduced by Tk 2.25 per litre but the petrol and octane remained unchanged.

In the first adjustment of March, diesel and kerosene prices had decreased by Tk 0.75, Octane dropped by Tk 4 and petrol by Tk 3.

Big tobacco push drives up per hectare production

FROM PAGE 1

“Tobacco plants require intensive use of fertilisers because they absorb more nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium than other major food and cash crops.... Many of these chemicals are so harmful to both the environment and farmers’ health that they are banned in some countries,” says a WHO report published in 2017.

Bangladesh has a vision to be a tobacco-free nation by 2040. In 2016, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina announced her commitment to implement the Tobacco Control Act and revise related laws to align with the World Health Organization’s Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

Tobacco’s adverse impacts on health is well known, including the risk of cardiovascular diseases, cancers and respiratory illnesses, but what it does to the environment is less often discussed.

Long before a tobacco product finds a consumer, it already leaves a serious impact on soil, water and air.

Numerous studies from home and abroad show tobacco farming reduces soil fertility, contaminates nearby water, pollutes air and destroys forest on such a scale that their combined effect pose a far greater risk compared to the production of any other crop.

Tobacco is also a major cause of carbon emission and deforestation.

According to the WHO, nearly 14 grams of CO₂ are emitted per cigarette over its life cycle. Also, production of 300 cigarettes requires about one tree, used to make cigarette papers and to dry tobacco leaf in a process called “curing”.

In case of Bangladesh, tobacco farming accounts for over 30 percent of the overall annual deforestation, putting the country third internationally in terms of the severity of the problem, after South Korea (45%) and Uruguay (40%), according to a study by PATH Canada.

SOIL POLLUTION

Tobacco is a major cash crop in Bangladesh, the 12th largest tobacco grower in the world as of 2020, according to data from the University of Bath.

In 2022-23, the country grew 65,227 tonnes of tobacco on 26,475 hectares (65,421 acres) of land, which is roughly 1 percent of the total arable land in the country, DAE data show.

One of the top tax paying sectors, tobacco industry generated more than Tk 32,502 crore in revenue from domestic cigarette sales (nearly 8 billion sticks) alone last fiscal, an 8% increase from the previous year, according to NBR data obtained unofficially from a source.

Bangladesh also exports a significant volume of unmanufactured tobacco, earning more revenue.

It comes with a cost. As farmers often apply excessive chemical fertilisers and pesticides provided by the big tobacco companies for higher yields, the soil loses fertility and the nearby water turns toxic, according to a scientific study done in Kushtia, a major tobacco growing district.

It so happens as the residues of tobacco plant, which contains nicotine, and the fertilisers and pesticides applied on the farm contribute to the increase or decrease of various soil and water properties, changing their natural composition and quality.

Published in the Malaysian Journal of Society and Space in 2015, the findings were based on a comparative analysis of test results of the top soil (0-15 cm) from tobacco and non-tobacco land as well as the water from around tobacco farm and non-tobacco farm. The samples were tested at Dhaka University lab.

The presence of Aldicarb, a pesticide, found in the tobacco farm denotes soil toxicity. The level of 1,3-dichloropropene, which also comes from pesticide, found in the tobacco land has the potential to damage soil properties.

When soil pH level falls, as it shows in this case, the soil turns more acidic and less fertile.

needed more and more fertilisers each year.”

The research was done by Juel Rana Kutub and Nishat Falgunee of Dhaka University’s earth and environmental science department.

High potassium concentration in soil solution hinders magnesium (an essential nutrient) uptake and may induce magnesium deficiency in

International Journal of Agriculture Research Innovation & Technology, the study was done by Asmaul Hosna Suma and others. The samples were tested at the laboratory of Soil Research Development Institute under the agriculture ministry.

“Significantly higher organic matter, nitrate, potassium, sulfur, and zinc content in tobacco land may be due to the addition of organic matter and nutrients such as nitrate, potassium, sulfur, and zinc fertilisers during tobacco cultivation,” said Prof Alamgir, who saw the research findings.

WATER POLLUTION

A single cigarette requires about 3.7 litres of water over its life cycle from cultivation, manufacturing, transport and use to disposal, according to a 2022 WHO report.

Tobacco needs up to eight times more water than many crops, including tomatoes or potatoes. For every kilogram of tobacco that is not produced, consumed and disposed of, the potable water needs of one person can be met for an entire year, the report says.

When such a large volume of water laced with nicotine, chemical fertilisers and pesticides sips into the water table and runs into nearby waterbodies with rainwater, it can disrupt, damage and even kill some aquatic lives.

The 2015 study in Kushtia shows that various hazardous residues, including 1,3-dichloropropene and aldicarb sulfoxide and aldicarb sulfonic toxic elements that come from pesticides, can enter the drainage aquifer and surface water and turn the water toxic.

Chlorpyrifos, another pesticide, in the tested water exceeded the acceptable limit and rendered the water hazardous to human health.

Nitrate, phosphorous and dissolved oxygen in the soil mainly came from chemical fertilisers and exceeded the acceptable nitrate level of 10ppm and phosphorous level of 10ppm as determined by the Department of Environment (DoE), the study found.

“A low pH level can kill aquatic life, including plants and fish,” said Prof Mirza Hasanuzzaman, adding that at dissolved oxygen level 3.01, as found in the study, many fish species will die while many other fish species will have stunted growth and become smaller over time due to changes in their genes.

Prof Manzoorul Kibria of Chattogram University’s zoology department, also coordinator of the university’s Halda River Research Laboratory, has long been researching various fish species of Halda river with support from Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation (PKSF), a government body, and Integrated Development Foundation (IDF), an NGO.

His own study last year found tobacco farming along the Halda river has been affecting the aquatic life in Halda, including various fish species.

“Mother fish would not spawn if the environment is not right. Suddenly in 2016, no mother fish spawned in Halda. We have not run any lab test, but based on the existing literature from home and abroad, we think the tobacco farming along the river was a key reason,” he said.

THE PULL FACTOR

Farmers are aware what tobacco farming can do to soil and water.

The Daily Star interviewed seven tobacco farmers in Bandarban and Khagrachari for this story, and all of them said tobacco cultivation leaves bad impacts on land as well as their health. Yet they are attracted to tobacco farming because of the high profit margin compared to other crops made possible by the cash, input and technical support from tobacco companies.

SOIL CONDITION OF TOBACCO VS NON-TOBACCO LAND		
Parametres	Tobacco (0-15cm)/ ppm or µg g ⁻¹	Other crops (0-15cm)/ ppm or µg g ⁻¹
pH	5	6
Nitrate (NO ₃)	40.25	-----
Phosphorus concentration (P)	51.89	17.24
Potassium concentration (K)	4.25	-----
Aldicarb	more than 0.010	-----
Chlorpyrifos	more than 0.09	-----
1,3-dichloropropene	more than 0.08	-----

SOURCE: JUEL RANA KUTUB & NISHAT FALGUNE, 2015



PHOTOS: MONG SING HAI MARMA

A tobacco farm next to the Toin Khal river in Bandarban's Alikadam upazila. Residues of tobacco plants and the fertilisers and pesticides used in the farm make their way into the waterbody, affecting aquatic life.

WATER CONDITION NEAR TOBACCO LAND VS NON-TOBACCO LAND		
Parametres	Near tobacco land/ppm	Near other crops/ppm
pH	6	7.02
Nitrate (NO ₃)	38	-----
Dissolve Oxygen (DO)	3.01	6.22
Phosphorus concentration (P)	55.88	17
Potassium concentration (K)	3.04	7.5
Aldicarb	more than 0.008	-----
Chlorpyrifos	more than 0.06	-----
1,3-dichloropropene	more than 0.07	-----

SOURCE: JUEL RANA KUTUB & NISHAT FALGUNE, 2015

“A pH level of 5, as found in this study, can kill many plants although some crops and trees can survive,” said Prof Dr Mirza Hasanuzzaman of Agronomy Department at Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University, who saw the research findings.

Excess phosphorous and potassium toxic anions that come from phosphate and potash fertilisers can reduce and change the pH level of the soil, says the study, adding, “For this reason, farmers in the study area

plants, said Prof Dr Md Alamgir of soil science at Chattogram University.

A separate study done in Tangail found that non-tobacco land contains significantly higher pH value and magnesium status, whereas tobacco land shows lower. Similarly, tobacco land shows significantly higher organic matter (OM), nitrate (N), potassium (K), sulfur (S), and zinc (Zn) content in the soil, whereas non-tobacco land shows lower.

Published in December 2022 in the

Ushe Mong, aged about 40, has been a tobacco farmer for about 11 years. For an experiment last year, he grew beans in parts of his land and tobacco on about 80 decimals of land in Bandarban’s Jamchhari area.

“At the end of the season, I made a profit of around Tk 135,000 from tobacco, while I could not even recoup my cost from the beans,” said Ushe, who grew tobacco on about two acres of land this season, and is expecting a higher profit margin than last year.

According to a study by Policy Research Institute of Bangladesh a few years ago, tobacco farmers earn around 30 percent more than non-tobacco farmers. Compared to rice, the return from tobacco is about 18.6 percent higher. It is about 33 percent higher compared with jute, the main cash crop.

Most tobacco farmers are known as “contracted farmers” in the tobacco industry, meaning they grow tobacco only for the tobacco company they are registered with. The company provides them with interest-free loan, free seeds, fertilisers and pesticides and technical support through their field agents.

All these costs are deducted from the value of the total harvest at the end of the season; the surplus is the farmers’ profit.

As of 2023, British American Company alone had nearly 52,000 contracted farmers, up from 30,000 in 2018, according to the company’s own data.

Data from other companies were not available.

“The success of our contract farming system stands as a proven model, with the company consistently setting high standards in agricultural best practices that benefit communities in diverse ways,” BAT’s 2023 annual report says.

THE BIG BENEFICIARIES

The real benefits go to the big tobacco companies, however.

In 2022, market research company Euromonitor International estimated the Bangladeshi tobacco market to be worth nearly Tk 420 billion (\$4.5 billion).

This is despite the fact that Bangladesh is a small player in the global tobacco market, equivalent to 2.3 percent of the total estimated global cigarette production, according to a 2018 report by BAT, the largest tobacco company in Bangladesh with about 85 percent of the market share.

In 2023, BAT’s profit after tax stood at Tk 1,788 crore, nearly a two-fold rise from Tk 925 crore in 2019.

Japan Tobacco International (JTI) is BAT’s nearest competitor, having 9 percent share, according to Tobacco Tactics, a research project of University of Bath.

Smaller domestic companies include Abul Khair Tobacco Company, Alpha Tobacco Manufacturing Company and Nasir Tobacco Industries Ltd.

Bangladesh government owns about 10% share of BAT, or about 57 lakh shares out of total 6 crore shares.

“We do not encourage any promotional tactics by tobacco companies. Yet, some big tobacco companies offer various incentives and bonuses to entice farmers into tobacco farming. We are committed to bring down tobacco cultivation both for health and environmental reasons,” Agriculture Minister Dr Abdus Sahid told The Daily Star yesterday.

(Tahira Shamsi Utsa and Prajakta Roy Chowdhury from Dhaka and Mong Sing Hai Marma from Bandarban contributed to this report.)

Syndicate siphons

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Many believe that the leader of the syndicate is Ruhul Amin Swapan, owner of Catharsis International, in Bangladesh and Datuk Seri Mohd Amin Abdul Nor, founder of IT firm Bestinet, in Malaysia.

The latter is a Bangladesh-born Malaysian citizen whose firm operates the Malaysian government’s Foreign Workers Centralised Management System (FWCMS).

There are many allegations of corruption and manipulation against his firm.

Overseas recruitment business insiders say several members of Bangladesh parliament, their relatives and political leaders are beneficiaries of the clique.

Ruhul, the owner of Catharsis, did not respond to repeated calls made by this correspondent.

The sources said a recruiting agent pays Tk 1,07,000 to the syndicate leadership for recruitment of each worker in Malaysia. The middlemen who collect job demand letters from the Malaysian employers take around Tk 1,60,000.

In recent months, the middlemen in Malaysia have been taking up to Tk 2,00,000, they said.

“Employers, certain officials of the Malaysian government and even the Bangladesh High Commission in Malaysia get a part of this money,” a source in Malaysia told this correspondent.

The four UN experts in their letter also said the recruitment process of Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia reportedly begins with bribery in the human resources and home affairs ministries of Malaysia, where “take quotas for bogus employers” are created.

On October 19 last year, Malaysian Home Minister Datuk Seri Saifuddin Nasution said “relaxing regulations on the hiring of foreign workers and the recalibration exercise” led to an excess of over 250,000 foreign workers in the manufacturing and service sectors, reported Malaysian newspaper, The Star.

A source in Malaysia said the government relaxed the approval rules for real employers, and certain companies took the chance to recruit more workers from Bangladesh than needed.

According to multiple sources and an estimate by this correspondent, Tk 2,67,000 (\$2,265) [Tk 1,60,000 for Malaysian middlemen and Tk 1,07,000 paid to the syndicate leader] is laundered out of the country for each worker who gets hired in Malaysia.

From August 2022 to April this year, around 4,50,000 Bangladeshi workers migrated to Malaysia for jobs. This means the syndicate siphoned over \$1 billion out of Bangladesh. “The money went mainly to Malaysia. A part of it may have been sent to some other countries,” a recruiting agent said.

Migrants often don’t go to licensed recruiting agents, and contact unauthorised middlemen who take Tk 50,000 to Tk 1 lakh.

Syed Saiful Haque, chairman of WARBE Development Foundation that was involved in the Verite survey, said workers who spent a lot for recruitment fees remained indebted for two to three years.

“If the workers don’t have jobs or remain underpaid, they go through untold sufferings, he said.

“A portion of the workers’ recruitment fee is sent abroad via hundi for paying bribes in Malaysia. This is how the country loses its foreign currency,” Saiful told this correspondent.

Mohammed Fakhru Islam, joint secretary general 1 at the Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies, said Malaysia froze its recruitment in 2018 as well as this year because of the anomalies.

In 2016-18, there was a syndicate of 10 recruiting agents and this time there are 100, he said.

“Our government should act to dismantle the syndicates,” he said. Syed Saiful Haque said the Anti-Corruption Commission must investigate the allegations of corruption and money laundering by the manpower agents.

As per a previous decision, Malaysia freezes recruitment of foreign workers from tomorrow.