A cattle market called Ekdanta Haat in Atghoria upazila of Pabna. Customers intending to make a purchase for upcoming Eid-ul-Azha say prices are too high while traders say sales are yet to pick up. The photo was taken on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AHMED HUMAYUN KABIR TOPU

Pandemic-induced new poor left unprotected

JAHID NUR

"Before the pandemic, people saw that we were afloat. People knew that we could eat, support our households. We were more or less okay before the coronavirus pandemic. That is why people did not help us and we could not hold out our hands," said Rashed, summing up perfectly how the lower-middle-income families were in between a rock and a hard place during the health crisis.

Rashed's household is a new poor— households that were afloat before Covid-19 but faced severe difficulties in making a living after the pandemic hit.

To understand how the new poor were trying to recover, we undertook a study where we tracked 39 new poor households in the Khulna district that were still struggling even after almost three years since the outbreak of the pandemic.

One of the dimensions of the study was to explore the adopted strategies of the new poor in their pursuit of recovery. Unsurprisingly, they reduced their expenditure on food consumption, education and health. In extreme cases, they skipped meals, dropped their children out of school and endured diseases without seeking healthcare.

They borrowed extensively from their relatives and microfinance institutions while trying to get engaged in multiple income-generating activities, even deploying members who were not working before Covid-19.

Trying to access social protection was another key strategy for the new poor. They actively reached out to the local representatives and a range of intermediaries, including local influentials and political leaders, to secure enlistment in programmes or receive one-off cash or in-kind transfers from the government. However, a significant portion of the new poor households was overlooked since they were considered "not poor enough."

Our interviews with the local representatives indicate that these households were attempted to be covered by the TCB (Trading Corporation of Bangladesh) family cards through which they could buy some necessary food items at subsidised prices.

It is quite apparent that individual efforts came much more to the fore while the new poor sought to recover, pointing to a glaring absence of state support. Naturally, the question of "why" comes to mind. One possible explanation could be the focus of the state on reducing poverty, particularly extreme poverty, in the immediate future as stressed in the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS). The existing social security system emphasises the "hardcore poor" and the most disadvantaged by design, therefore, leaving out the non-poor but vulnerable section.

While one can easily understand the case for giving precedence to the extreme poor, it puts the low and lower-middle-income workers in the informal economy at severe risk of being unprotected from crises, such as the one the country is experiencing now. In fact, it can defeat the purpose of poverty reduction through social security since households floating just above the poverty line can (and do) end up becoming poor within a very short time.

This is where the concept of "vulnerability" in addition to "poverty" begs for attention. Traditional measures of poverty lines based on income or expenditure remain very popular in the national and global arenas due to their simplicity in measurement and understanding. Thus, they dominate the global spaces of discussion around poverty where states try to showcase how they are contributing to eradicating extreme poverty. However, they miss vital aspects of deprivation including risks, distress, assets, dignity, access to healthcare or education, leading to a gradual global shift toward focusing on vulnerability.

Putting emphasis on vulnerability along with poverty can spotlight the multidimensional facets of deprivation and help identify and safeguard populations at risk during crises such as the new poor.

The NSSS recognises the importance of vulnerability and the necessity to provide support to the crisis-affected population to facilitate their recovery. However, the dominant narratives in the state's policy spaces are still revolving around the concept of poverty and thresholds, rendering the vulnerable non-poor "not poor enough" to receive state support. The time is nigh to reconstruct our vision. Otherwise, the bid to become a developing nation, and more importantly, sustain that status will be in serious vulnerability.

The author is a research associate of BRAC Institute of Governance and Development.

EU to impose tariffs of up to 38% on Chinese EVs

REUTERS, *Brussels*

The European Commission notified car makers on Wednesday that it would apply additional duties of up to 38.1 percent on imported Chinese electric vehicles from next month, a move likely to draw possible retaliation from China.

Less than a month after Washington quadrupled duties for Chinese EVs to 100 percent, Brussels said it would set tariffs of 17.4 percent for BYD , 20 percent for Geely and 38.1 percent for SAIC over what it said were excessive subsidies.

China's commerce ministry said it would closely monitor the development and resolutely take all necessary measures to safeguard the legitimate rights of Chinese companies.

The EU provisional duties are set to apply by July 4, with the anti-subsidy investigation set to continue until Nov. 2, when definitive duties, typically for five years, could apply.

The Commission said it would apply rates of 21 percent for companies deemed to have cooperated with the investigation and of 38.1 percent for those it said had not.

The new tariffs will come on top of the existing EU tariff of 10 percent. Western producers such as Tesla and BMW that export cars from China to Europe were considered cooperating companies.

Margaritis Schinas, a Commission vice president, told a news conference that Chinese-built cars were benefiting from unfair levels of subsidies, threatening EU producers.

"On this basis the Commission has reached out to Chinese authorities to discuss these findings and explore possible ways for resolving the issues identified," he told a news conference.

The indicative tariffs are above expectations of analysts of between 10 percent and 25 percent on Chinese EVs.

BYD, Geely, SAIC and Tesla did not immediately respond to Reuters' queries on the report.

The move comes as European automakers are being challenged by an influx of lower-cost EVs from Chinese rivals.

China has rebuked the EU over the anti-subsidy investigation, urged cooperation and lobbied individual EU countries, but not fully spelt out what its response to tariffs would be.

Where can you buy cattle without cash this Eid?

AM JAHID

Anyone unwilling to deal with the hassle of carrying a large amount of cash to buy sacrificial animals for Eid-ul-Azha can now make their life easier by visiting a cattle market offering cashless transaction facilities.

Around 10 markets, most in Dhaka and Chattogram, are providing such facilities.

Syed Mohammad Kamal, country manager for Bangladesh at Mastercard, said this initiative has been taken to facilitate the acceleration of digital payments.

A digital payment booth has been set up in each of these cattle markets with the facility of a POS machine, two ATMs, MFS services, and an agent banking booth.

The Bangladesh Bank (BB) and Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) came up with the initiative and jointly organised an event titled "Smart Haat" at the former's auditorium yesterday.

DNCC Mayor Atiqul Islam, BB Executive Director and Spokesperson Md Mezbaul Haque, and other officials of banks and the city corporations were present at the event.

Of the 10 markets, six fall in the Dhaka North City Corporation and one is in the Dhaka South City Corporation area.

BRAC Bank will provide the cashless service at Bou Bazar cattle market in Diabari of Uttara, while Bank Asia will facilitate proceedings at Sutibhola Khal in Bhatara area.

City Bank, bKash and Nagad will provide the service at Basila cattle market in Mohammadpur while Islami Bank Bangladesh, bKash and Nagad will offer services in Gabtoli of Mirpur.

The digital transaction service will also be given at Eastern Housing cattle market in Mirpur Section 6 and the cattle market near Dhaka Polytechnic Institute respectively by AB Bank, IFIC Bank and Pubali Bank.

The dwellers under the Dhaka South City Corporation will get the service from Pubali Bank at the Hazaribagh cattle market.

Two cattle markets -- Sagarika and Nur Nagar -- in Chattogram have also been equipped with the digital transaction system by Islami Bank Bangladesh and United Commercial Bank respectively.

Besides, Sonali Bank will provide the digital service in Singra municipality cattle market in Natore.

Kamal said both buyers and sellers would benefit.

"There is risk when carrying money, both for buyers and sellers. So, they will sell or buy cattle without any risk of theft," he said.

Md Kabir Ahmed, a resident from the capital's Indira Road area, was very happy to learn about cashless facilities at the Gabtoli cattle market as he is planning to buy a sacrificial animal from there.

"I don't like carrying cash to cattle markets by risking mugging," he said.

Usually cattle markets are overcrowded ahead of Eid, which presents pickpockets and thieves with the opportunity to steal or snatch money from buyers or sellers, he added.

Mastercard's Kamal said this is one of the biggest steps to transform the country into "Smart Bangladesh" by 2041 and make it cashless by 2031.

"About Tk 70,000 crore is transacted during the Eid. If we can bring a portion of the money into the digital system, it will be a great achievement," he added.

Gold rush grips Asia despite near-record prices

REUTERS

Demand for gold in Asia is surging despite prices hovering near the record highs it hit in May, industry officials say, as buyers snap up the metal to hedge against geopolitical and economic uncertainty.

Spot gold is trading a little over $2,300 per ounce, up about 12 percent year-to-date and only about 6 percent shy of the record high it hit last month.

Lower confidence in other investment options, such as real estate and equities, is also a factor behind the demand for gold, analysts say.

"When the macro-economic backdrop returns to normal, when real estate and equities are more interesting, I think that price sensitivity will return," Ruth Crowell, chief executive of the London Bullion Market Association, told Reuters.

Lower confidence in other investment options is also a factor behind the demand for gold, analysts say

In Japan, there are more gold bulls than bears despite record high prices, according to Bruce Ikemizu, chief director of the Japan Bullion Market Association.

Chinese investors grappling with currency devaluation, a protracted real estate downturn and trade tensions are also finding value in gold, experts said. China's purchases of gold coins and bars surged 27 percent in the first quarter of this year.

"The trend in the market has been that if the consumer wants to buy gold, they will. The price doesn't matter," Albert Cheng, CEO of the Singapore Bullion Market Association, told Reuters on the sidelines of the Asia Pacific Precious Metals Conference.

Elsewhere in Asia, retail investors have been pouring money into the safe-haven asset, with the metal finding increased acceptance among younger buyers.

Oil and gas industry hops on generative AI bandwagon

AFP, *New York*

Away from the Microsoft and Googles of the world, a century-old industry -- oil and gas -- is hoping that generative artificial intelligence will make producing petroleum more efficient and easier on its workforce.

Long before the current craze surrounding generative AI (Gen AI), the energy sector employed traditional artificial intelligence through its use of data to identify oil and gas deposits.

But the industry sees even greater potential to save money, reduce accidents and lower greenhouse gases through Gen AI, which exponentially increases and diversifies the data that can be analyzed.

The new AI programs can also be employed broadly in the workforce instead of being limited to programmers and data analysts, as has been the case with traditional AI.

"Extracting this data from the copious amounts of data generated by drilling activities has historically posed a significant challenge for industry leaders," recently wrote Tim Hafke, content marketing specialist with AlphaSense. "That's where Gen AI comes in."

In recent years the downstream industry, which includes refineries that process crude oil into gasoline, has increasingly relied on so-called digital twins -- computer-modeled replicas of actual facilities.

They allow companies to run simulations to assess operational issues in real-life facilities, mitigate potential hazards and do predictive maintenance (PdM).

PdM uses historical and current data to project future performance and determine when parts should be taken down for maintenance or replaced.

Pumpjacks are seen during sunset at the Daqing oil field in Heilongjiang province, China. Long before the current craze surrounding generative AI, the energy sector employed traditional artificial intelligence through its use of data to identify oil and gas deposits.

PHOTO: REUTERS/FILE

Microsoft vice president Matthew Kerner sees this as an entry point to generative AI, a way "to explain why the predictive model is making that prediction" and provide context to better address the situation, he explained during a panel discussion at energy conference CERAWeek.

"Gen AI is useful as a bolt on to some other more predictive AI systems," Kerner said.

Next-generation chatbots similar to the world-famous ChatGPT can also be of help for employees on the ground, said Rob McGreevy, of industry software company Aveva, during the panel.

The data-filled chatbot could allow oil field or refinery workers encountering a problem to measure atmospheric conditions like humidity and operational performance like wellhead pressure to quickly diagnose the issue, McGreevy said.

Getting a detailed report in seconds allows for a quick fix -- saving time and money in the process.

During refinery maintenance, "you're putting people in dangerous situations to do work.