

Top WTO official warns of fertiliser risks over war

AFP, Yaoundé

Disruptions to fertiliser supplies caused by the Middle East war pose a double threat to global food security through scarcity and high prices, a top World Trade Organization official has warned.

Iran has virtually shut the Strait of Hormuz, choking a vital transit route for oil and gas -- as well as fertilisers.

A third of the world's fertilisers normally transit the strait, and the disruption has prompted multiple warnings about the impact on food production.

"Fertilisers are the number one issue of concern today. If there is no more fertiliser, there is an impact on quantities but also on prices," WTO Deputy Director-General Jean-Marie Paugam told AFP in an interview in Yaoundé.

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The Gulf's ample supplies of natural gas, a key ingredient in artificial fertilisers, have made the region a major manufacturer.

But production has been severely impeded by the war, with some major facilities forced to shut down.

Major food exporters such as India, Thailand and Brazil depend on the Gulf for urea, a nitrogen-based fertiliser, making them vulnerable.

Because the war is only a few weeks old, there is currently no fertiliser shortage, Paugam said.

"But if fertilisers from the Gulf do not circulate, we will feel a direct impact on supplies to major producer countries just as planting seasons begin for the crops that will be harvested next year," he said.

"If the Strait of Hormuz is blocked for three months, the impact will be significant."

Risk of stockpiling - Net food-importing countries would be in a very bad position, including "a large part of west Africa and north Africa", Paugam noted.

This effect can be amplified if countries start stockpiling, as happened during disruptions to international trade at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic.



Crocodiles crawl around a small pool at Reptiles Farm Ltd in Bhaluka, Mymensingh. The country's first commercial crocodile farm is now struggling to survive after years of neglect, ownership changes, and stalled exports.

PHOTO: MD AMINUL ISLAM

First commercial crocodile farm gasping for survival

MD AMINUL ISLAM, Mymensingh

The country's first-ever commercial crocodile farm, established around 22 years ago, is on the verge of closing due to frequent changes in ownership and a long and persistent history of neglect.

At present, the Reptiles Farm Ltd is as good as abandoned, farm sources say.

Established on 15 acres of land at Hatibeer of Mymensingh's Bhaluka upazila, the farm has been handled by four different managements since 2004, failing to achieve any significant growth over the two decades.

During the pandemic years, the farm suffered a heavy blow. Many crocodiles died from neglect, and the export of crocodile skins came to a standstill.

"The pandemic was a nightmare, especially for businesses around the world, and we were also affected," said Dr Abu Syem Muhammad Arif, the farm's manager.

The number of crocodiles at the farm is around 4,000, including 100 at the breeding stage. Around 300 of them can be harvested for skin, he said. A crocodile reaches maturity for skins in three years, while 10 to 12 years are needed to reach its breeding stage.

However, the present stock of crocodiles is far below the farm's capacity.

"The farm has a capacity of stocking around 40,000 crocodiles," Dr Arif said.

"We had a target to enrich the farm with a stock of 20,000 crocodiles, but it has yet to be fulfilled."

The farm could not fulfil its pending order to export 400 skins in 2022, and also failed to export 500 skins early in 2023, farm sources said. The last shipment was made in 2019, before the pandemic hit.

The farm made its maiden skin export to Japan in 2014 when it shipped 430 crocodile skins for around \$200,000, said farm sources.

Until 2019, the farm exported a total of 1,507 pieces of skin. This falls way below the farm's initial target to export 1,000 per year, hoping to expand the volume gradually. Instead, the number of annual exports has fallen to zero, Dr Arif said.

On average, each piece of skin fetches \$600 to \$700 in the international market. Crocodile leather is used for making luxury handbags, wallets, belts, boots and so on, Dr Arif explained.

A TURBULENT JOURNEY
Mushtaq Ahmed, a late writer, and Mesbahul Hoque, an entrepreneur, started working on crocodile farming in 2002. They jointly launched the farm, investing Tk 5 crore with 49 percent financial support from the Equity and Entrepreneur Fund (EEF) of the government in the form of an interest-free loan after getting approval from the Forest and Environment Ministry in May 2004.

The farm was later sold to PK Halder in 2012. In 2020, Halder's involvement in graft came to light, following which his ownership was cancelled.

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Amid the legal debacle, the farm remained abandoned for nearly two years. Then, the High Court formed a committee to run the farm in 2022.

International Leasing and Financial Service Ltd (ILFSL), to which the farm owed more than Tk 100 crore, sold the farm at auction in 2023 to recover the money.

The farm is now owned by Uddipan, a non-governmental organisation. The new owner has so far been unable to get the farm's business rolling anew, yet continues to incur losses as the farm's operational costs remain high.

Mir Khairul Alam, adviser (Programme Development and Resources Management) of Uddipan, spoke of several obstructions in the way of resuming the farm's business.

As the ownership of the farm has changed hands, the new owners need to acquire fresh

certification for crocodile skin export from the authorities concerned. They need to secure approval from the Forest and Environment Ministry.

Uddipan is also working towards registering the farm as a joint-stock company, he said.

"The farm remains stagnant," the adviser added. "We are also bearing the extra maintenance costs for the crocodiles as we are unable to do business without the proper certification and approvals at present."

POTENTIAL OVERLOOKED
Prof Dr Md Rafiqul Alam of the Department of Surgery and Obstetrics of the Faculty of Veterinary Science at Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU) said the sector has great prospects. However, it needs to be handled with proper management to achieve the desired goals.

The professor stressed the need to focus not only on the major export product -- skin -- but also on the by-products, and even crocodile meat.

By-products such as skull, bones, nails, and scrap leather could be sold in both domestic and international markets, potentially fetching an additional \$700 to \$800 from each crocodile. Charcoal made from crocodile bones is used in manufacturing perfumes throughout the world, the expert said.

The reptile's meat shouldn't be overlooked, he said. It is consumed widely in Australia, Japan, Singapore, China and the US, where each kilogram of crocodile meat is sold between \$30 to \$35, he added.

As the export of crocodile meat is not allowed in Bangladesh, it is simply dumped after harvesting the skin. In this situation, the meat could be supplied to the country's high-end hotels, which can prepare meals for foreign visitors. The farm will benefit well from selling five to six metric tonnes of meat per year, he said.

The estimated cost for rearing a crocodile for three years until its maturity is \$300, and it is expected to bring in \$600 to \$700 in revenue from the export of its skin, Dr Alam added.

Job interviews work both ways

PARVEZ MURSHED

"Tell me about yourself" is the most common opening question in a job interview. By asking this, an interviewer may inadvertently signal they have not fully gone through the candidate's CV. In reality, while the interviewer asks the questions, the candidate is quietly conducting a reverse interview. They are asking themselves, "Do I really want to work for this organisation, this person or in this role?"

The truth is, top talent has choices. They also need to be convinced that this is the right organisation, the right role and the right manager to support their career growth.

Very few organisations coach employees on how to conduct interviews. Yet the process leaves a lasting impression on candidates. It begins when they submit their CV, whether through LinkedIn or a company portal, and continues with how quickly HR responds. For entry-level roles, there may be competency tests, including case studies and team presentations, to assess both group and individual performance.

I have often found that candidates who stand out are unconventional. They may be bold in their thinking or positively provocative in how they approach problems. Hiring, however, is complex. There is no perfect formula.

Organisations invest significant time and money in recruitment, yet even then, the selected candidate may not be the right fit. Sometimes the candidate decides the role is not what they expected. At other times, the organisation concludes the individual is not working out.



A common mistake among hiring managers is to be overly impressed by fluency in English and personal flair. Even Jack Welch admitted in his autobiography that he made early hiring mistakes by favouring style over substance. Sandy Weill, former chief executive

of Citigroup, took a different approach. He would invite senior candidates to dinner with their spouses and later seek his wife's opinion on whether they would fit the organisation's culture.

Candidates, for their part, should research the company before the interview. This may include preparing a short presentation outlining their understanding of the role, what they can bring and how they would approach the first 90 days. Interviewers, meanwhile, can seek feedback on candidates through professional networks or previous employers.

When Michael Carrick interviewed for the interim coach role at Manchester United, he reportedly presented a match-by-match strategy for the rest of the season. He secured the job and quickly improved the team's performance, delivering one of the more notable coaching spells since Sir Alex Ferguson.

Organisations have a professional responsibility to treat candidates with respect, regardless of the position. One basic courtesy is to inform candidates of the outcome at the end of the process. Preparing for interviews requires significant time and effort, and candidates deserve closure.

Global organisations with strong human resource practices often call candidates and provide feedback. Others rely on automated emails to inform them they have not been selected. Less professional organisations do not respond at all. This "ghosting" has become common, and candidates are often better off moving on to other opportunities. As the saying goes, "When one door closes, another opens".

The writer is a senior consultant for banks and financial institutions

Red Sea failure casts long shadow over Hormuz security efforts

REUTERS, Los Angeles/London

The Western allies trying to negotiate a way to protect the Strait of Hormuz for energy shipping face a stark reality: a similar effort in the Red Sea that started years earlier cost billions of dollars and ultimately failed against Yemen's Houthis.

The costly Red Sea experience - four ships sunk, more than \$1 billion in weapons expended, and a route that the shipping industry still largely avoids - looms over the more complex Strait of Hormuz, the shipping artery



used by roughly a fifth of global oil and liquefied natural gas supply and now blocked by Iran, a more formidable adversary than the Houthis.

Driver Joseph Orinon says gas prices have doubled in recent months due to the crisis in the Middle East.

Iran's threats to the strait and its attacks on energy infrastructure in nearby Gulf nations have sent oil prices soaring in the worst disruption to oil and gas supplies in history. Absent the strait's reopening, shortages will

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Asia looks to Covid-era playbook to tackle fuel crisis

REUTERS

Countries across Asia are weighing up work-from-home policies and stimulus measures enforced during the Covid pandemic, as they scramble to respond to global fuel shortages triggered by the Iran war.

Asia is at the frontline of the fuel crisis, buying more than 80 percent of the crude that transits the Strait of Hormuz, which has been almost totally blocked by Iran since the war broke out on February 28.

Driver Joseph Orinon says gas prices have doubled in recent months due to the crisis in the Middle East.

No country in the region has enforced work-from-home measures yet, but some have said they are on the table.

"I think it is a good idea," South Korean Energy Minister Kim Sung-whan said on Tuesday when asked about an International Energy Agency recommendation for people to work from home.

The IEA, which agreed a record release of around 400 million barrels of oil from strategic stockpiles to deal with the crisis, has outlined proposals to ease oil price pressures such as working from home and avoiding air travel.

IEA Executive Director Fatih Birol repeated those calls at a conference in

Sydney this week.

"There were real-life tests, such as after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, European countries adopted these measures, and it was announced by the European governments. It helped them

a lot to go through these difficult times without Russian energy ... but keeping the lights on," Birol said.

Industrial powerhouse South Korea on Tuesday launched a public campaign asking people to cut shower time, charge



An oil tanker is docked unloading crude oil at the port in Qingdao, in China's eastern Shandong province, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

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