



Watermelon prices have cooled at the field level after Eid, owing to weak demand. This photo was taken recently at the wholesale watermelon market of Port Road in Barishal, adjacent to the Kirtankhola river.

PHOTO: TITU DAS

# Watermelon farmers in south suffer despite bumper harvests

Low demand after Eid caused sharp fall in farmgate prices, growers say

SUSHANTA GHOSH, SOHRAB HOSSAIN, and DIPANKAR ROY

A bumper harvest in the coastal districts of Barishal and Khulna had piqued watermelon farmers' hopes, yet they are now struggling to sell the summer fruit even at marked prices.

Low interest from wholesalers, rising transport costs, and a drop in demand after the month of Ramadan have added up to their plight.

The Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) in Barishal had targeted watermelon cultivation on 62,687 hectares this season. Farmers exceeded this target, achieving about 113 percent, with a total of 70,662 hectares -- nearly 16,000 hectares more than last year.

Production is expected to exceed 2.8 million tonnes, up from around 2.1 million tonnes last year. The region now accounts for about 75 percent of the country's total watermelon production.

Wholesale transactions centring watermelon trade in Barishal alone exceeded Tk 4,500 crore last year and may reach around Tk 6,000 crore this season. At the retail level, market value could be up to three times higher.

However, the situation at the field level is bleak.

Riaj Mridha, a farmer from Nurabad union in Charlesson upazila of Bhola, said he spent around Tk 100,000 to cultivate watermelons. He harvested 2,200 watermelons and brought them to Barishal by trawler for sale.

He sold them for around Tk 200,000 but spent Tk 50,000 on transport, commissions, and labour costs.

"How much profit is left?" he lamented. The fruit, popular during Ramadan, has now lost demand, and prices have

dropped sharply, said Mosharrar Hossain, a farmer from Charlesson.

"We are facing heavy losses," he added. Nazrul Islam Sikdar, additional director of the DAE in Barishal, said farmers are not receiving the expected prices.

"Farmers are even leaving produce unharvested in some cases. The fuel crisis is the main reason behind this situation,"

wholesale traders' enthusiasm and hiked up retail prices. The gap between farm and retail prices has widened more than threefold.

Farmers sell medium to large watermelons at Tk 50 to Tk 90 per piece, while retail prices range from Tk 100 to Tk 500.

Jasim Sardar, owner of Sagar Fruit

brought under watermelon cultivation this year -- about 7,000 hectares more than last season.

Mohammad Amanul Islam, deputy director of the DAE in Patuakhali, said favourable weather ensured good production, but prices fell as supply increased.

Some coastal farmers harvested early to profit from high demand during Ramadan.

However, farmers are not getting the expected prices in wholesale markets as demand has now dropped.

"Although retail prices range between Tk 100 and Tk 400 per piece, we are forced to sell at nearly half the price in wholesale markets. In many cases, we are incurring losses," said Nazrul Mia, a farmer from Haridebpur in Galachipa.

**SURE PROFIT TURNS INTO GAMBLE**

Dakop upazila remains the largest watermelon-producing area in Khulna, with around 6,800 acres under cultivation this season -- more than half the district's total.

Despite good production, falling prices have left farmers concerned.

The district's DAE said early-harvested watermelons from Patuakhali had saturated markets in Khulna early, pushing prices down. As a result, Dakop farmers did not get the expected prices.

Local farmer Nixon Mondal said watermelon farming, once profitable, has now become akin to "gambling."

Meanwhile, in Khulna, watermelon was grown on 17,291 hectares last year, dropping to 12,930 hectares this year.

Nazrul Islam, deputy director of the DAE in Khulna, said many farmers failed to recover production costs last year, reducing interest in watermelon farming and shrinking cultivated area.



he said. Kamal, a trawler owner operating along the Kirtankhola River, said he often has to buy fuel at prices 30 percent higher than usual from retailers.

"Transporting goods to Dhaka now costs around Tk 40,000, up from Tk 20,000 to Tk 22,000," said Abdur Rob, a transport company staff member on Port Road, Barishal.

"Trips that previously took 8-10 hours now take 24-30 hours, increasing the cost of transporting perishable goods," he added, blaming frequent and long refuelling stops for the delay.

Rising transport costs have dampened

Bhandar, a wholesale trader on Port Road, said fewer traders are coming to purchase watermelons, resulting in weak demand despite ample supply.

Wholesale trader Ganesh Dutta acknowledged the significant gap between wholesale and retail prices.

"We sell large watermelons weighing 8 to 12 kilogrammes for Tk 120 to Tk 200, but in retail markets they are priced at Tk 400 to Tk 550," he said.

**WHEN BOON BECOMES BANE**

Patuakhali accounts for nearly half of watermelon cultivation in the Barishal division. According to the DAE, around 35,000 hectares of land have been

# Demystifying CSR

MAMUN RASHID

We often confuse charity with CSR (corporate social responsibility), and label all sorts of activities as CSR. I once heard the chief executive officer of a bank describe sponsoring Indian Idol singers at a social club as CSR. Another claimed compliance with regulatory norms was CSR. At a television talk show, a chamber leader repeatedly urged banks to reduce SME loan interest rates as part of their CSR. Mid-ranking defence personnel once wrote to a bank seeking CSR funds to develop a golf course. Perhaps the height of it was the Bangladesh Bank allocating part of its CSR fund to champion a Yes vote during the last referendum. Some commercial banks followed.

CSR goes far beyond charity. It is not simply about donations to good causes. It is a year-round responsibility that companies should accept to serve the community. It must be integrated with corporate values, culture and business strategy, and contribute to long-term sustainability. Profits should reflect core values and adherence to best practice. CSR is more than engagement with the local community. Brand value does not rest only on quality, price or uniqueness. It also depends on how companies treat their workforce, interact with communities and manage their environmental impact. Performance is judged not only by inputs but by outcomes, by the difference made each day and the contribution to sustainable development.

CSR calls for finding a niche as an ethical organisation. From a business perspective, the question is how a competitive advantage can be created, or even a niche product developed, through CSR. Innovation comes from looking ahead to environmental and social trends and planning for opportunities in that changing landscape. To identify a future niche, a business must watch trends constantly, stay alert to its environment and recognise the product client mix to which it is uniquely suited. Even today, CSR is often seen as charity. In reality, the reverse is true. Charity can be part of CSR, reflecting a corporation's contribution to the community in which it operates.

CSR creates a broader picture when a company voluntarily integrates economic, social and environmental concerns into its business and communicates transparently with stakeholders. Yet companies interpret their duty to society in different ways. For some, it forms part of CSR. For others, it falls under corporate citizenship. Large companies often present such initiatives as a commitment to responsible corporate citizenship and industry partnership. Done properly, CSR can advance economic and social well-being and help people realise their full potential. Corporate governance runs alongside it. It shapes how companies operate within regulations and how they manage business processes to deliver a positive impact on society.

In that sense, CSR and social reporting amount to corporate governance in action. They ask whether companies conduct business responsibly, how they are perceived by clients, regulators and stakeholders, and whether they support national visions for economic and social development. They also raise a harder question: are companies backing the right causes in the name of charity, or simply attaching their name to convenient projects?

Despite years of debate, there is still no clear consensus on what CSR truly means or how much value it adds. Too often, it is reduced to glossy reports and carefully crafted public relations campaigns. For some businesses, CSR represents an opportunity to strengthen competitiveness and build long-term value. For others, it appears to be a distraction from core commercial objectives or even a potential threat to profitability. However, CSR has continued to develop well beyond its philanthropic and community roots with a growing focus on the business case, making the business a socially responsible one and different from the crowd.

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# Pharma logistics in demand as war rattles supply chains

AFP, Florstadt

Medicines can stop pain, fight cancer and save lives but are worthless if they get lost in the mail, spoil in a hot warehouse or are stuck on a ship.

This is where pharmaceutical logistics comes in -- a fast growing sector in a world where key supply chains have been shaken by war, pandemic and trade chaos.

One of its European hubs is what Germany's DfL calls its health logistics campus near Frankfurt, dedicated to ensuring drugs and other crucial medical products reliably get to where they're needed.

As fears of medicine shortages grow amid the five-week-old Middle East war, its task is to ensure steady shipments to hospitals, pharmacies, labs and other customers across Europe and worldwide.

The company's facility -- the size of 14 football fields, with its roofs covered in solar panels -- is located in Florstadt outside Frankfurt, itself a transport centre in the middle of Europe.

Products passing through the giant site range from insulin capsules and lifestyle drugs to medicated sunblock and drums of sulphuric acid.

Strict temperature controls and workers in protective suits ensure that medicines are handled under sterile conditions and in guaranteed cold chains.

"Our 600 employees are specially trained because they know that, ultimately, the patient is at the end of the supply chain and no errors are allowed," said Katrin Hoelter, head of DfL's logistics division in Germany and the Alpine countries.

READ MORE ON B2

AFP, Brussels

With the war in the Middle East sending global fertiliser prices soaring, the EU is coming under pressure from farmers and some member states to take action.

Agriculture sector representatives are due in Brussels for talks with the European Commission on April 13, as many complain the conflict risks plunging an already strained industry into a deeper crisis.

"The situation is very dire," lamented Amaury Poncet, a cereal farmer in central Belgium.

This winter he bought fertilisers for 380 euros (\$439) a tonne, up from 330 euros last summer, he noted. "And since things flared up in Iran, prices are going further up," he told AFP.

About a third of fertilisers shipped by sea reach the global market through the Strait of Hormuz that Iran has effectively closed in retaliation against US-Israeli strikes.

That sent prices up, with the UN expressing concern in particular about the impact on developing countries.

In Europe, the price of nitrogen fertilisers, which are derived from gas, has risen by around 20 percent over the

past month, and is approaching 500 euro per tonne -- a one-two punch for farmers already facing higher costs because of the war in Ukraine.

Cereal producers, who need vast amounts of the stuff, have been hit

particularly hard, said Luc Vernet of Farm Europe, an agriculture sector think tank.

"They haven't been able to make a living for the past three years," he said.

In France alone, about 300,000 hectares of land once used for cereal

farming has been left fallow or abandoned since 2022, he said.

**'STRATEGICALLY IMPORTANT'**

Brussels, which has slapped high tariffs on fertilisers from Russia -- a major producer -- with plans to end imports by 2022 in a bid to hit Moscow's war coffers, has found itself again the target of requests for help.

France and farmers groups are pushing for a pause in the application of the EU's carbon border tax on fertilisers.

But the commission, which has promised an action plan for May, has so far ruled that out.

Supporters point out that the levy targets carbon-intensive imports to level the playing field for European industries subject to strict emissions rules, noting their development is key if Europe wants to avoid a similar crisis in the future.

The crisis sparked by the Iran war has made it "clear that maintaining strong domestic fertiliser production is strategically important for Europe", said Fertilizers Europe, an industry group.

A commission spokeswoman said the EU executive was continuously monitoring prices and has already "taken several measures to help farmers with affordability of fertilisers".



A farmer prepares to use urea fertiliser in his cornfield in La Planche near Nantes, France. In Europe, the price of nitrogen fertilisers, which are derived from gas, has risen by around 20 percent over the past month.

PHOTO: REUTERS/FILE