Pests threaten soybean harvest in Subarnachar

ANWARUL HAIDER

Siraj Mia, 70, a farmer from Katabunia village in Char Amanullah Union of Subarnachar upazila, Noakhali, had spent Tk 10,000 this year cultivating soybeans on 40 decimals of land. He had hoped to harvest 12 to 15 maunds (1 maund = 40 kg) and, with prices ranging from Tk 1,500 to Tk 1,600 per maund, expected a profit of Tk 10,000 to Tk 14,000.

However, pests have attacked his entire field, putting his expected yield at risk.

Like Siraj Mia, most farmers in Subarnachar -- known as the granary of Greater Noakhali, which includes Noakhali, Lakshmipur, and Feni -- are reporting widespread pest infestations.

This season, Subarnachar's soybean fields cover 10,120 hectares, while the total area planted in Noakhali district is 17,059 hectares. The district's production target is 31,559 tonnes, with an expected average yield of 1.85 tonnes per hectare, Ashish Kumar Kar, deputy director of the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) in Noakhali, told The Daily Star.

According to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Foreign Agricultural Service, Bangladesh is expected to plant soybeans on 105,000 hectares in the marketing year (MY) 2026-27, producing 180,000 tonnes -- a 5 percent increase in area and a 2.8 percent increase in production compared with MY 2025-26.

Farmers say pesticides are having no effect

Yet the country produces only about seven percent of its annual soybean requirement. Soybeans are mainly grown in the southern belt, including Noakhali and Lakshmipur in Chattogram division, and Pirojpur, Patuakhali, Borguna, and Bhola in Barishal division.

Soybeans are increasingly popular due to lower production costs and minimal irrigation needs. Farmers plant them after harvesting Aman rice, relying on residual soil moisture, and harvest in 100-110 days.

Usually, farming starts between mid-December and January, but last year's heavy rains and prolonged waterlogging delayed planting. Harvest is now expected in late April or early May.

CROP DAMAGE VISIBLE IN FIELDS

A visit to several fields in eight unions of Subarnachar on Monday afternoon revealed serious crop damage.

Although the fields appear green from a distance, closer inspection showed hairy caterpillar infestations on the leaves and shoots.

Over the past two weeks, pests have fed on the undersides of leaves, causing holes, browning, and leaf death. In some areas, black spots have appeared on leaves, and plants are failing to flower.

Farmers now fear they will be unable to meet production targets. Many worry about financial losses, as some have leased land, taken high-interest loans from moneylenders or non-governmental organisations, and even sold livestock such as cows and goats, in the hope of a profitable harvest.

Subarnachar Upazila Agriculture Officer Md Harunur Rashid acknowledged the pest attack but

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PHOTO: ANWARUL HAIDER

Soybean fields in Subarnachar, Noakhali, face widespread pest infestations, threatening yields and farmers' incomes despite pesticide use. Inset: Leaves damaged by hairy caterpillars show holes, browning, and black spots as plants struggle to flower.

US now Bangladesh's top soybean supplier

SOHEL PARVEZ

The United States has become Bangladesh's top soybean supplier, as private importers increased purchases under a reciprocal trade deal and US prices eased earlier in the year when Chinese demand briefly slowed.

In the first eight months of marketing year (MY) 2025-26, the US supplied 84 percent of Bangladesh's soybean imports, up from 48 percent a year earlier, according to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Bangladesh produces only about 7 percent of its annual soybean requirement, mainly in coastal districts. The rest comes from abroad.

In the July-February period of MY26, the country imported 13.5 tonnes of soybeans, USDA said in a report on Bangladesh oilseeds and products published last month. Of that, 11.3 tonnes came from the US, while Brazil supplied the remaining 16 percent.

The surge in imports followed Dhaka's decision to buy more American farm goods under a reciprocal trade agreement. The package covers wheat, soybeans and soy products, as well as cotton, with an estimated total value of $3.5 billion.

As per the deal, Bangladesh agreed to purchase at least 700,000 tonnes of wheat a year for five years and at least $1.25 billion, or 26 lakh tonnes, of soybeans over one year.

The agreement drew criticism at home and stirred concern among businesses.

It came after the Trump administration cut the reciprocal tariff on Bangladeshi exports to the American market to 19 percent from an initial 37 percent imposed in April last year, citing efforts to narrow the US trade deficit. Bangladesh runs a trade surplus with the US.

In August last year, Washington set the rate at 20 percent on shipments from Bangladesh after the interim government agreed to buy 25 Boeing aircraft, 35 lakh tonnes of American wheat over the next five years, and increase imports of US cotton, liquefied natural gas (LNG), soybeans and other agricultural products.

Annual demand for edible oil in Bangladesh stands at about 48 lakh tonnes, with palm oil and soybean oil dominating the market because of their availability and relatively low prices.

In November, three major local soy crushing firms, Meghna Group of Industries, City Group and Delta Agro, committed to purchase $1 billion worth of American soybeans over the next one year, boosting prospects for US exports.

Bangladesh depends heavily on imports to meet edible oil demand because domestic output is limited. Local production meets only about 10 percent of the country's total requirement, according to USDA estimates.

The USDA said four oilseed crushing mills are now operating in Bangladesh. Domestic crushers supply about one-fourth of the country's soybean oil demand of 17 lakh tonnes, with the remaining 75 percent imported as crude soybean oil and refined at home.

The agency said local crushers earn most of their profits from soybean meal rather than oil.

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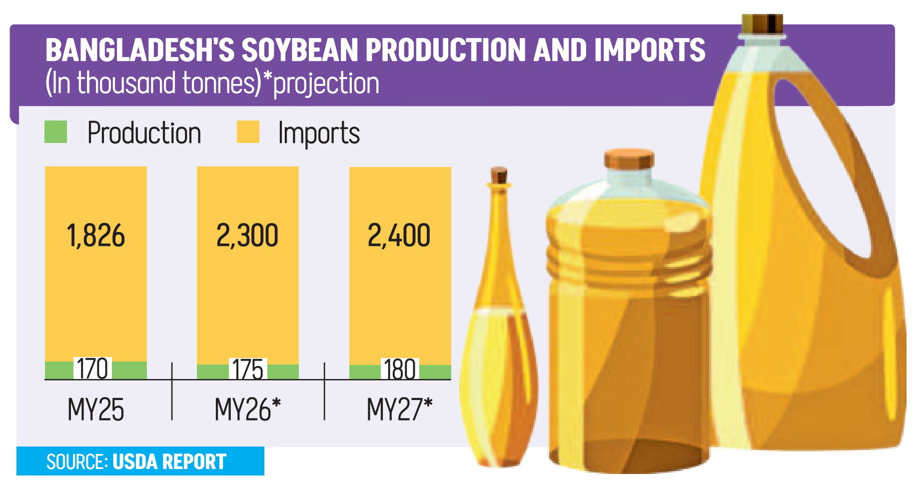

Middle East war challenges and opportunities for Bangladesh

AF NESARUDDIN

There is no denying that any war between two or more nations carries a huge financial cost, apart from human casualties, including deaths, partial and permanent disabilities, loss of property and damage to infrastructure and strategic installations. It becomes particularly tragic when civilians are targeted, whether deliberately or accidentally. Over the past few decades, the Iran-Iraq war, the Kuwait war, the Russia-Ukraine war and the relentless bombing in Gaza have demonstrated the devastating consequences of conflict, with the global economy suffering significantly. The recent US-Israel attack on Iran is a serious development that is reshaping the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East and gradually affecting the wider world. Many Middle Eastern and Gulf countries are exposed to the risks of escalation because of the presence of US military bases. Unfortunately, there is no visible sign of a ceasefire. In recent years, increasing migration of Israeli citizens, mostly to Europe, has created economic and social pressures there. At this stage, it is unclear where the global political and economic order is heading.

Like many other countries, Bangladesh is feeling the strain, even as it seeks to steer a damaged economy towards stability and prosperity. A large number of non-resident Bangladeshis work in the Middle East, which is the second largest source of foreign exchange earnings. If businesses in the region close or suffer financial hardship, many workers may lose their jobs in the short term. Economic priorities in Middle Eastern countries could shift sharply. Unless the conflict takes a different turn, several Gulf states may face heavy financial burdens linked to US war spending.

At the same time, uncertainty over fuel supplies from the Middle East has made the global economy more vulnerable. The cost of goods and transport has already begun to rise, with little sign of easing. Countries with fragile economies and modest growth are being hit hard, and Bangladesh is among them. These are the direct impacts.

Bangladesh's main export earnings come from the readymade garments sector, with North America and Europe as key markets. There is growing concern that the world economy is moving towards recession. If that happens, demand for Bangladeshi exports is likely to fall, reducing export volumes and earnings.

Pressure from foreign debt repayments will be another crucial challenge. The release of committed funds is becoming more difficult if debt covenants are not fully met. Existing foreign loans are already high relative to repayment capacity. Even new loans on concessional terms would add to future repayment obligations and increase financial strain.

Yet within this difficult situation lies opportunity. Middle Eastern and Gulf countries may need large-scale rehabilitation and reconstruction projects. Bangladeshi workers in the Middle East, Malaysia and Singapore have proved themselves hard working, loyal and skilled, particularly in construction.

Alongside skilled workers, there will also be demand for semi-skilled and unskilled labour. Bangladeshi construction firms could also find scope to expand their operations. Some oil-rich Middle Eastern countries may be reluctant to favour allies of Israel in awarding contracts, potentially diverting jobs and business to others. Bangladesh's prospects will depend on how efficiently and strategically the government acts, and how effectively it manages diplomatic relations.

The world appears to be passing through a dark and uncertain period. It is difficult to say when clarity will emerge. Bangladesh must remain cautious and pragmatic, managing its limited resources wisely. Any misguided decision could prove costly, and economic growth could suffer further setbacks.

The writer is a senior partner of Hoda Vasi Chowdhury & Co and a past president of ICAB

Hormuz closure divides the fortunes of Middle Eastern oil states

REUTERS, *London*

The Strait of Hormuz's closure and the resulting surge in global oil prices have handed financial windfalls to Iran, Oman and Saudi Arabia, while other states that lack alternative shipment routes have lost billions of dollars, a Reuters analysis found.

Iran effectively shut the Strait - a route for about a fifth of global oil and LNG flows - after US and Israeli airstrikes on Iran at the end of February led to a widening conflict.

It later said it would allow transits by vessels that had no US or Israeli links. As a result, some tankers have managed to cross the narrow waterway, but energy markets have still experienced unprecedented disruption. International Brent crude rose by 60 percent in March, a record monthly increase.

US President Donald Trump has threatened to rain "hell" on Tehran unless it makes a deal by the end of Tuesday that would allow traffic to start moving through the Strait of Hormuz.

GEOGRAPHY DETERMINES OIL FORTUNES

While much of the world faces a surge in inflation and economic damage from the energy price rise, for the Middle Eastern oil producers, the impact has depended on their geography. Although Iran has control over the Strait, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates can bypass it via pipelines and ports.

By contrast, oil from Iraq, Kuwait and Qatar has been trapped as the countries lack alternative routes to international markets.

Following Trump's latest threat, an Iranian official told Reuters Iran would not open the Strait as part of a temporary ceasefire. It has rejected Trump's previous ultimatums, saying it will not be humiliated.

Some analysts say the US-Israeli war on Iran in some ways has strengthened Tehran. "Now that Hormuz has been closed, it can be closed again and again, and that poses a major threat to the global economy," said Neil Quilliam, associate fellow at think tank Chatham House. "The genie is out of the bottle."

The International Energy Agency described the conflict as the world's biggest energy supply shock yet, citing more than 12 million barrels per day of regional shut-ins and damage to about 40 energy facilities.

The Reuters analysis of March export data found Iraq and Kuwait's estimated notional oil export revenues both plunged by about three-quarters year-on-year. Conversely, Iran's revenues rose by 37 percent and Oman's by 26 percent. Saudi Arabia's oil revenues increased by 4.3 percent, while the UAE's dipped by 2.6 percent as the price surge offset lower volumes.

The estimates use export volumes from ship-tracking firm Kpler and JODI data, where available, multiplied by average Brent prices, and compared against a year earlier. Brent was used for simplicity, even though many of these crudes are priced against other benchmarks currently trading at significant premiums to it.

PHOTO: AFP

Commuters make their way past a billboard with a sentence reading 'The Strait of Hormuz remains closed' at the Enqelab Square in Tehran on April 5.

SAUDI ARABIA GETS HIGHER ROYALTIES AND TAXES

For Saudi Arabia, higher prices mean increased royalties and taxes from state oil giant Aramco, which is overwhelmingly owned by the government and its sovereign wealth fund.

The uplift is particularly positive for the kingdom following heavy spending on projects designed to diversify its income away from oil that had contributed to a budget deficit.

Aramco declined to comment when asked about Reuters' calculations. Representatives for the other countries or their oil companies did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

SAUDI PIPELINE WAS BUILT DURING IRAN-IRAQ WAR

The kingdom's biggest pipeline is the 1,200-kilometre (746-mile) East-West link, built in the 1980s during the Iran-Iraq war to bypass Hormuz.

It connects eastern oilfields to the Red Sea port of Yanbu and is operating at its expanded 7 million barrels per day capacity.

Aramco uses about 2 million bpd domestically, leaving roughly 5 million bpd for export. Yanbu loadings averaged a near-capacity 4.6 million bpd in the week starting March 23, shipping data shows, despite attacks targeting the hub on March 19.

Overall Saudi crude exports fell 26 percent year-on-year in March to 4.39 million bpd, Kpler and JODI data showed. Still, higher prices increased the value of those exports by roughly $558 million from a year earlier. Riyadh had pre-emptively boosted exports in February to their highest since April 2023, in case of a US attack on Iran.

Despite the advantage of the East-West link, Quilliam said Saudi Arabia remained vulnerable to further strikes by Iran or its allies in Yemen, the Houthis, against its energy infrastructure in the west and vessels passing through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait to the Red Sea.

IRAQ HAS SUFFERED THE BIGGEST DROP

The UAE has been shielded to an extent by its 1.5-1.8 million bpd Habshan-Fujairah pipeline, which bypasses the Strait. Its estimated oil export value still fell by more than $174 million year-on-year in March. Fujairah has come under a series of attacks that led to loading halts.

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