

A Correspondent

Cox's Bazar: Hit hard by Covid-19 fallout, businesses in the tourism sector in the beach town of Cox's Bazar look for a gradual comeback after Eid-ul-Azha eyeing the next winter as an opportunity to stay afloat by hosting tourists from home and abroad in the hub of the country's tourism industry.

Around 470 hotels and motels, over 2,000 food outlets, Burmese Market, tourism-based business houses and thousands of workers in the sector have remained almost idle since March 18 following the coronavirus out-break in the country.

"Tourism and relevant businesses will be allowed to reopen after Eid-ul-Azha with strict conditions (health protocols) in place," Deputy Commissioner of Cox's Bazar M Kamal Hossain told.

Residential hotels, restaurants and businesses linked to the tourism industry will be given permission to reopen if they can maintain health guidelines strictly and take other preventive measures to stop transmission of COVID-19 virus, he said.

"It's true that the tourism industry is hit hard and suffered losses amid the closure of tourism activities due to COVID-19. The sector will gradually regain pace if businesses are reopened after Eid-ul-Azha," Kamal Hossain said.

On March 18, the authorities imposed a ban on public gatherings at different tourist spots in Cox's Bazar, Sylhet, Chattogram and Patuakhali to slow down the coronavirus transmission among people.

Cox's Bazar district administration enforced restrictions on arrival of tourists in the city and all sorts of gathering at beaches.

"Cox's Bazar has turned empty without any tourist amid the restrictions due to COVID-19. Other related businesses also witnessed closure in the last four months resulting in colossal losses," Abul Kashem, general secretary of the Cox's Bazar Hotel Motel Guest House Owners Association, told.

He said the volume of financial losses will further increase if businesses are not allowed to reopen after Eid-ul-Azha.

General Secretary of "Save Cox's Bazar Movement" advocate Ayasur Rahman said the COVID-19 has apparently paralysed the overall economic activities here.

Many people involved in the tourism business have become jobless while nobody knows when the virus will disappear, he told.

M Ashraf Zaman, proprietor of Hotel Kollol, said he has fallen into a trap of loan to pay salaries and utility bills in the last four months.

"Most people involved in tourism business are now depending on loans in various forms to meet their daily expenditures on family needs. They'll get a chance to survive if businesses are reopened after Eid-ul-Azha," Cox's Bazar Tour Operators Association President Rezaul Karim told.

He, however, said it will be very difficult to recover the losses what they have already incurred.

Countrywide Loss

Bangladesh International Hotel Association (BIHA) has said the tourism industry in the country, like other countries in the world, has been hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic, with its international standard hotel sector, a vital organ of the tourism industry, suffering the most.

To salvage the sinking sector, BIHA has come up with their six-point recommendation calling

upon both the public and private concerns to come forward to sway the imminent disaster. There are over 310,000 people and their families who depend on this sector, according to BIHA. BIHA leaders, including its President HM Hakim Ali, sought Tk 500 crore from the government's own funds to the hotel employees who have been forced to stay at home during the lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic which is to be disbursed among them directly on the basis of their monthly salary or through their business organizations.

The tourism sector's contribution to GDP is 4.4 per cent, said BIHA.

The COVID-19 has already caused a severe loss of about Tk 2,500 crore in the sector and if this situation continues, the loss of the hotels in Bangladesh will exceed Tk 7,000 crore by the end of this very year, BIHA said.

According to the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA), more than 310,000 hotel workers and employees in Bangladesh are at risk of becoming unemployed as a result of the corona pandemic.

According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), a specialized agency of the United Nations, the Covid-19 pandemic has caused a 22 percent fall in international tourist arrivals during the first quarter of 2020.

UNWTO said the crisis could lead to an annual decline of between 60 percent and 80 percent as compared to 2019 figures.

The crisis in tourism business across the globe puts millions of livelihoods at risk and threatens to roll back progress made in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).