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Afghan pomegranate pickers left jobless

Thousands of tons of the juicy red fruit rot at shuttered border



KANDAHAR: A vendor selling pomegranate juice waits for customers at his stall in Kandahar. — AFP

KANDAHAR: Afghanistan's festive pomegranate season has begun, but this year thousands of tons of the juicy red fruit risk rotting on trucks blocked at Pakistan's frequently shuttered border-leaving thousands of farm workers unemployed. With its tart and crunchy, ruby-red seeds locked inside a leathery red rind, the pomegranate is renowned for its health benefits, and is one of the most important crops in the country's south.

But the fruit is ripening as Afghanistan finds itself engulfed in a multitude of crises that have metastasized since the Taliban seized control two months ago. "We have 15,000 farm workers in this region who have been laid off because the trade has been paralyzed and the fruit is rotting," Haji Nani Agha, who heads the Fresh Fruits Union in Kandahar, said. In the shade of pomegranate

shrubs, the melon-sized fruits fill burlap bags and crates being loaded onto trucks soon to head towards the Spin Boldak border with Pakistan.

But there their voyage comes to a halt. Islamabad has cut sales tax on imported fruits to zero in a bid to boost trade from its neighbor, but also tightened controls on ordinary Afghans trying to cross over, fearing illegal entries. It has caused a tug-of-war between Pakistani authorities and Afghanistan's new rulers, who have frequently closed the border in protest. Exporters hoping to sell their wares have found themselves stuck for days and even weeks in scorching heat. "It is a catastrophe for all of Afghanistan, because all of Afghan trade goes through this border," Agha said.

Usually, between 40,000 and 50,000 tons are exported across

this border to Pakistan, and also on to India and the Gulf states each year. But so far, only 4,490 tons have left the country, according to Abdul Baqi Beena of the Chamber of Commerce in the southern city of Kandahar.

"These products are waiting to be sold, but the more they are delayed, the more their quality deteriorates and the more their sale value plummets," he said. Even before the dramatic power shift, Afghanistan's agriculture sector had been hard-hit by drought and intense fighting in a number of provinces. For years, the previous Western-backed Afghan governments and international donors tried to convince farmers to give up farming poppies for illegal opium production and instead grow fruit—such as pomegranates. —AFP