S ALAM GROUP

S Alam Group has donated 50 pieces of high flow nasal cannula to 6 hospitals for the treatment of Covid-19 affected patients of the country. Barrister Biplob Barua, prime minister's special assistant; Md Akiz Uddin, personal secretary to the chairman of S Alam Group; Tanveer Ahmad, member of S Alam family and director of Islami Bank Bangladesh Ltd; Farhad Uddin Hasan Chowdhury, registrar; Aktar, director of Dhaka Medical College and Hospital; Md Abul Hasnat Joarder, director of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University; Brigadier General Kazi Md Rashid-Un-Nabi, director; and Md Alimuzzaman Khan of Sir Salimullah Medical College Hospital; Md Shahadat Hossain, vice principal of Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College and Hospital; AKM Sarwarul Alam, director of Kuwait Bangladesh Friendship Government Hospital; Monjurul Haque, assistant professor of Mugda Medical College and Hospital, took part in the hand over programme on July 26.

Gold hits record high as US-China ties worsen

REUTERS, *Tokyo*

Gold hit an all-time high on Monday as tit-for-tat consulate closures in China and the United States rattled investors, boosting the allure of safe haven assets, although sentiment was mixed with tech gains supporting some Asian stocks.

MSCI's ex-Japan Asia-Pacific index rose 1.3 per cent as Taiwan's TSMC, Asia's third-largest company by market capitalisation, rose almost 10 per cent.

The chipmaker's gains boosted other tech stocks in the region and came after rival Intel signalled it may give up manufacturing its own components due to delays in new 7 nanometer chip technology.

Also soothing sentiment, Chinese shares eked out gains after big falls late last week, with CSI300 index rising 0.5 per cent.

S&P500 futures were last up 0.4 per cent in choppy trade while Japan's Nikkei fell 0.5 per cent, resuming trade after a long weekend and catching up with falls in global shares late last week. Global shares had lost steam last week after Washington ordered China's consulate in Houston to close, prompting Beijing to react in kind by closing the U.S. consulate in Chengdu.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo took fresh aim at China last week, saying Washington and its allies must use "more creative and assertive ways" to press the Chinese Communist Party to change its ways.

"U.S. President (Donald) Trump used to say China's President Xi Jinping is a great leader. But now Pompeo's wording is becoming so aggressive that markets are starting to worry about further escalation," said Norihiro Fujito, chief investment strategist at Mitsubishi Securities.

Gold rose 1.0 per cent to a record high of $1,920.9 per ounce , surpassing a peak touched in September 2011, as Sino-U.S. tensions boosted the allure of safe haven assets, especially those not tied to any specific country.

The yellow metal is also helped by aggressive monetary easing adopted by many central banks around the world since the pandemic plunged the global economy into a recession.

Global prospects dim for China's tech champions as great powers clash

REUTERS, *Shanghai*

Huawei Technologies' founder Ren Zhengfei's global ambitions are marked in bricks and mortar at a new company campus in southern China, where the buildings are replicas from European cities.

Zhang Yiming, founder of ByteDance, the operator of short video app TikTok, has plastered his Beijing headquarters with posters including a cover of former Google CEO Eric Schmidt's book "How Google Works", and has long said he will build a global firm that can compete with U.S. tech giants.

But the two companies which best exemplify China's ambitions to challenge U.S. tech dominance are now stymied by strains in relations between China and countries including the United States, India, Australia and Britain.

Chinese companies with world-beating technology -- including drone-maker DJI, artificial intelligence firms Megvii, SenseTime and iFlytek, surveillance camera vendor Hikvision and e-commerce conglomerate Alibaba Group -- are also among those losing access to markets.

Smaller companies are being forced to re-think too.

"What we are experiencing now is unprecedented," said a Chinese startup founder who has operations in the United States and India but asked not to be identified as he is now considering walking away. "My entrepreneurial spirit has been dampened due to all this, let alone global ambitions." It's a big shift from even a year ago, when the U.S.-led trade war with China and security concerns about Huawei were having little impact on most Chinese tech champions.

SenseTime and Megvii, backed by U.S. investors, were eyeing big IPOs. ByteDance's TikTok unit was enjoying unfettered global growth. Alibaba was touting the global prospects for its cloud business, and DJI was consolidating domination of the drone business.

But then came new U.S. sanctions against Chinese tech firms last October, prompted in part by repression of the Muslim Uighur population in the Western province of Xinjiang.

U.S. President Donald Trump has ratcheted up anti-China rhetoric as he seeks re-election and Chinese President Xi Jinping has taken a tough line. Tensions have also risen between Beijing and other countries over new security laws passed for Hong Kong, and a border skirmish with Indian troops led to an India government ban on 59 Chinese apps.

Now China's top tech players are having contracts cancelled, products banned and investments blocked, with more restrictions on the horizon.

ByteDance could be forced to sell TikTok as Washington considers following India in banning the short video app, a global product that analysts say is worth at least $20 billion.

Huawei is set to lose billions of dollars a year in revenue from bans on its network equipment, and more countries could follow the United States, Britain and others in blocking the company's gear.

The U.S. Interior Department has grounded the privately held DJI's fleet and halted additional purchases because of data security risks, and more restrictions could be in the offing.

Pandemic turns Europe's retail sector on its head as shoppers stay close to home

REUTERS, *Lisbon*

City centre shops and malls may have lost their lustre during the COVID-19 pandemic, but as lockdowns ease across Europe many stores in and around residential areas stand to benefit as consumers remain reluctant to venture far from home.

While retail sales appear to be rebounding - surging 17.8 per cent in the euro zone in May and approaching pre-lockdown levels in Britain in June - shoppers are increasingly staying local, leaving Europe's most renowned shopping districts from London's West End to Berlin's Kurfurstendamm struggling in the absence of office workers and tourists.

On Germany's main shopping streets in Hamburg, Cologne and Berlin, footfall in June was as much as 50 per cent lower than a year earlier, according to the German Retail Federation, while in London's West End it was down 75 per cent, according to the New West End Company, an association of retailers and landlords in the area.

Many consumers have shifted to buying goods online, but they are also heading out to shops in residential areas and 46 per cent of consumers across Europe aim to shop more locally in the long term than they did before the pandemic, data from Ernst & Young shows.

The trend could mean a significant shift in earnings patterns for major European retail landlords such as Unibail-Rodamco-Westfield, Klepierre, and Carmila with their mix of city centre and suburban shopping malls.

Germany's ECE operates nearly 200 shopping centres across Europe and told Reuters that centres in areas with a local customer base are approaching pre-lockdown footfall levels - whereas city-centre locations were serving just two thirds of their usual customer base.

In Britain, shoppers are buying local not just for convenience goods, but other items such as clothes which they would usually buy on a day out in the centre of town, said Jonathan de Mello of retail consultancy Harper Dennis Hobbes. "People are being very careful about where and how many times they shop," he said.

Half of Britons in a YouGov survey of 1,032 people said they would now feel uncomfortable visiting an enclosed retail space like a shopping mall.

"What was once a fabulous shopping experience at a central location is now actually just a place full of risk," said Andrew Cosgrove, global consumer lead analyst at Ernst & Young.

At retail locations in central London and bigger UK cities footfall between 14 June and 12 July was between 69.2 per cent and 75 per cent lower than the same period last year, according to analytics firm Springboard.

Local high streets in smaller towns saw a 42.1 per cent drop and suburban outer London a drop of 40 per cent - around a third better than central London fared, if still a substantial loss on last year.

The loss of city centre business has already prompted big retailers to retrench, notably in Britain where Marks & Spencer and John Lewis among others have announced store closures and hefty lay-offs.

Some smaller retail chains that were struggling before the pandemic have collapsed, while mall operator Intu Properties, owner of Manchester's Trafford Centre and already battling high debt, was forced to bring in administrators.

In France, Denmark, Germany, Finland, Norway, Sweden and the UK at least 40 per cent of people are visiting physical stores less, according to Ernst & Young - and only 20-35 per cent are ordering more online, not enough to make up the shortfall. A recent rebound in sales as lockdowns have eased has also not been as robust as retailers might have hoped for.

Springboard estimates that in the week beginning July 6, overall footfall at retailers across continental Europe remained around a fifth below the same week a year ago, and 40 per cent lower in the UK, according to data shared with Reuters.

Fashion and footwear are the hardest-hit retailers, with spring and, in some countries, summer collections gone to waste in lockdown. Clothing and footwear sales surged 70 per cent in Britain in June from May but remained 35 per cent below pre-pandemic levels, data released on Friday showed.

In countries like Spain and Portugal still facing partial or regional lockdowns, due to localised coronavirus outbreaks, movement around retail and recreation spaces such as shopping centres as well as restaurants and cafes remains 20 per cent below pre-lockdown levels, Google mobility data shows.

REUTERS/FILE

A store worker walks with an equipment, amid the spread of the coronavirus disease in Oxford Street in London, Britain.

Fish farmers Tk 220 crore poorer for flood

FROM PAGE B1

"My investment has been stuck as I cannot sell the juvenile fishes," he said.

Bishwanath's Kalu Mia had a similar account.

"Now we are in a state of idleness. The flood has not only eaten up part of my investment but also affected the sales of fingerlings," said Mia, who grows fingerlings from the spawn of carp fishes.

What's worse, they had to spend more on spawns this year as the transport costs had escalated for the coronavirus-induced countrywide general shutdown.

Mia went on to urge the government for support for fish growers such that they can bounce back from the losses stemming from the pandemic, the recent cyclone Amphan and the ongoing flood.

Contacted, Fisheries and Livestock Secretary Rawnak Mahmud said fisheries officers are advising farmers to collect nets to build fences around their farms for protection.

"We are monitoring the damages done by floods by fisheries officials. I have no record so far that fish farms have been washed away," he said, adding that the government would take care of the farmers if they suffered losses for the unusual situation.

The government is working to provide relief to the affected areas.

"But the issue of losses of fish farmers has not arisen on a large scale anywhere. That is why we are to yet to think about the matter."

On providing support to cyclone Amphan-affected farmers, the MoFL secretary said they have tried to provide input support to the growers.

The DoF prepared a list of farmers affected by the cyclone and has submitted it to the ministry of fisheries and livestock (MoFL).

The MoFL is trying to ensure that the affected aquaculture farmers can get access to funds from the Tk 5,000 crore-stimulus package announced by the Bangladesh Bank earlier in April for growers to help them recover from the pandemic-induced economic shock.

Funds from the package would come at 4 per cent interest.

The DoF estimated that more than 39,000 farmers suffered nearly Tk 400 crore in losses thanks to the cyclone Amphan in May. Kurigram's farmer Islam and Sylhet's Ali said easy access to the low-cost loans would enable them to reinvest and recover from the outsize damages.

While the central bank has issued a notice for flood-affected farmers, including crop and livestock producers, Bishwanath's fish farmer Rahman has no idea how to avail the loan facility.

"I do not understand this (loans from the bank). I do not know where to go and how to proceed," said the flood-affected farmer over the phone on Saturday night.

Alibaba, Jack Ma summoned by Indian court on former employee's complaint

REUTERS, *New Delhi*

An Indian court has summoned Alibaba and its founder Jack Ma in a case in which a former employee in India says he was wrongfully fired after objecting to what he saw as censorship and fake news on company apps, documents seen by Reuters showed.

The case comes weeks after India cited security concerns in banning Alibaba's UC News, UC Browser and 57 other Chinese apps after a clash between the two countries' forces on their border.

Following the ban, which China has criticized, India sought written answers from all affected companies, including whether they censored content or acted for any foreign government.

In court filings dated July 20 and previously not reported, the former employee of Alibaba's UC Web, Pushpandra Singh Parmar, alleges the company used to censor content seen as unfavourable to China and its apps UC Browser and UC News showcased false news "to cause social and political turmoil".

Bonus disbursement not up to the mark

FROM PAGE B1

His field level officers have been monitoring the progress of bonus payment.

"We have so far seen good progress in disbursements," Roy told The Daily Star without going into specifics on the percentage of bonus paid.

"However, it is our expectation that all management will complete disbursements within the next two or three days," Roy said, adding that by the end of the final day of Eid, only two to three small factories might have failed to pay bonuses, which is a yearly occurrence.

Reckitt Benckiser profits off people's heightened hygiene habits amid pandemic

FROM PAGE B1

Sourcing of raw materials has been a problem because of the global lockdown but the company has had a stock of enough raw materials to produce products for Bangladesh, Arefin said.

"We maintain a level of stock in our company all the time," he told The Daily Star.

Like others, Reckitt Benckiser faced challenges to market products during the pandemic-induced shutdown. However, it managed to keep the supply smooth, Arefin said. The huge demand for hygiene products may peter out once an effective virus to treat the virus is available, the company secretary said.

"However, some people have become used to using hygiene products and they would continue to do so."

Making home ownership viable

FROM PAGE B4

In response to the assault of covid-19, our Prime Minister showed her sagacity in promptly announcing a stimulus package to support the economy. Soon, there were demands from different trade bodies and associations, seeking fiscal support for their respective sectors.

I will not comment on matters relating to other sectors but I will qualify my views relating to the real estate industry. I am totally against providing any kind of financial support, be it in the form of interest waivers or new loans on low interest rates to inept developers who have run into financial distress on account of their own greed and incompetence.

This will only give a wrong signal that it is okay to be irresponsible and incompetent because you would eventually get bailed out. These are the developers who created havoc in the industry by offering very high rates to landowners and sign innumerable deals without any regard to the financial viability of the projects.

Bailing them out would be harmful to the real estate sector. These shoddy developers also bring untold misery to the unsuspecting buyers who get lured in by fancy advertising and colourful brochures only to find that with any turbulence in the market, the developer has indefinitely delayed the completion of the project, or in some cases, abandoned it completely.

Such malpractice gives the entire industry a bad name and destroys the buyers' confidence.

The objective of the government's policies should be to make the market strong and vibrant. Not to bail out non-performing developers. Policies should be directed at making home ownership affordable and investment in housing to be a financially lucrative proposition.

There is an old proverb, 'you can't have your cake and eat it too'. This applies to our policy makers when it comes to housing. Do you want to make it possible for the maximum number of people to own homes and the housing industry to prosper, or do you want to maximize government revenue by imposing direct and indirect taxes that makes home ownership unaffordable? You cannot have it both ways.

The writer is the chairman of bti Holdings Ltd

China to fast-track construction of its economic zone in Ctg

FROM PAGE B4

Basically, Chinese investors are interested in Bangladesh as they want to take advantage of the country's competitiveness in global trade, such as its eligibility for low tariffs, he said.

"We should introduce long-term policies so that investors can take initiatives about investment. This is also needed to attract foreign direct investment," Chowdhury noted.

He said foreign investors have no question regarding the existing policies in Bangladesh but they want those to be stable.

The policy stability issues, including those on taxes and custom duties, were pointed out by a visiting Chinese delegation in November 2019. They stated to be happy with the existing rules and regulations for businesses.

Policy stability was needed to help investors prepare their business plan and avoid uncertainties as the world's second-largest economy looked to broaden its footprint in Bangladesh through investments and relocating factories, they said.

Indian transhipped goods to pay Tk 2 a tonne in road fee

FROM PAGE B1

KOLKATA-ASHUGANJ-AKHAURA RIVER ROUTE

India's long-cherished idea of transhipment became a reality on 19 June 2016, when trucks carrying Indian goods reached Tripura from Ashuganj port under the river protocol.

Much has not progressed, however, as only 17 consignments went to Tripura through Akhaura from the Ashuganj river port because the proposed inland container port in Ashuganj and the four-lane road project from Ashuganj to Akhaura has not completed yet.

In 2016, three consignments were delivered under the arrangements, carrying 4,030 tonnes of products. Bangladesh earned Tk 11.80 lakh in fees.

The following year, 1,600 tonnes of goods went to Tripura and Tk 4.92 lakh was earned.

In 2018, 6,642 tonnes of goods were transported to Tripura and 4,500 tonnes the following year. So far this year, 3,000 tonnes were ferried, allowing Bangladesh to earn Tk 19 lakh, Tk 5 lakh and Tk 2.5 lakh respectively.

The government has undertaken a project to build the river port and four-lane road network with financing from India. The project is being delayed by the complexities related to land acquisition.

India has provided three lines of credit worth $7.5 billion to Bangladesh, and a majority of the money is meant to develop the infrastructure needed for the connectivity through Bangladesh.