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Asian Markets	
MUMBAI	▼ 0.83% 16,191.63
TOKYO	▼ 2.05% 10,123.58
SINGAPORE	▼ 0.44% 2,757.14
SHANGHAI	Closed (Friday closings)
Commodities	
Gold	▲ \$1,112.75 (per ounce)
Oil	▲ \$79.33 (per barrel) (As of Friday)



Women line up with flowers in hand to pay respect to language martyrs at the Central Shaheed Minar in Dhaka yesterday. Florists counted brisk sales in February, a month that saw three occasions: Pahela Falgun, Valentine's Day and International Mother Language Day.

## A month of florists

KAWSAR KHAN

Flower business has witnessed brisk sales this month mainly because of three occasions linked to the traditional symbols of love and honour.

The occasions are International Mother Language Day, Valentine's Day, and Pahela Falgun, the first day of spring in Bangla calendar.

Florists said demand for flowers was high throughout the month, pushing up prices.

"We buy 100 roses for Tk 200-Tk 300 on normal days. The prices shot up to Tk 1,000 on the eve of February 21," said Badal Chowhan, proprietor of Jharbera Puspalay at Shahbagh. "It's for the first time I saw such a price boom."

Chowhan said wreath and bouquet makers also bagged extra bucks.

Sellers at the flower shops at Shahbagh said they prepared for supplying flowers and other related items two days prior to Language Martyrs' Day.

"We couldn't sleep last night (February 21) because of the huge work pressure," said Arif, a flower shop representative at Shahbagh.

The sellers also said flower supply was low on February 21 as flowers in gardens across the country were nearly sold out on and after Pahela Falgun and Valentine's Day.

Demand was so high that the shops collected rosebuds, failing to get the blooms, said Abdus Salam, another Shahbagh trader who began such business in 1993.

Salam said he saw a lot of changes in the sector after he had joined the trade.

In the past, most flowers had been imported, but now the country produces many traditional flowers meant for business.

Jessore is the main domestic source of flowers. Jhenidah, Munshiganj, Dhaka and Bogra are also emerging as flower zones.

The traders said Shahbagh was the prime retail and wholesale flower market in the capital in the past, but now Farmgate is the main wholesale market.

"Besides the flower selling outlets, there are eight to nine dedicated companies in the capital who decorate places or event venues with flowers on different occasions," said Liaqat Hossain, a member of Bangladesh Flower Growers and Exporters' Association.

Flower business runs round the year but the peak season is between December and April when different cultural, political, social, religious and family programmes take place.

Sector people said the business has been expanding over the years, but the sector is still faced with a lot of problems, including a lack of flower preservation facility, poor maintenance and absence of any permanent market.

"Poor maintenance and packaging cost them 30-40 percent loss during transportation," said Chowhan of Jharbera Puspalay.

Erratic weather also harms their flowers at the makeshift shops at Shahbagh, said some traders.

"We have to pay toll to the government party stalwarts and also the law enforcers since some 25 shops in the market don't have legality to run business," said a trader.

According to Export Promotion Bureau statistics, Bangladesh exported flower/foilage worth \$17.33 million in the first half of the current fiscal year with 9.20 percent growth over the same period last year.

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## New protest against prices in Russia

AFP, Moscow

More than 1,500 people took to the streets Sunday in Russia's north to protest living costs -- the first of a new series of challenges to the Kremlin in coming weeks, organizers said.

Despite freezing temperatures, protesters gathered in the port of Arkhangelsk to decry increasing prices. Some called for Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to step down, said a member of an opposition movement that helped organize the protest.

"People came out into the streets in solidarity with other cities, where protest action took and is taking place, (and) many speakers say time has come to take to the streets and seek the truth from the authorities," Ilya Yashin, a member of the Solidarnost (Solidarity) opposition movement, said on Echo of Moscow radio.

# Home loans on a roll

## Specialised private financiers widen market share

SAJJADUR RAHMAN

Housing finance by specialised private providers has been rising rapidly in the past few years, fuelled by growing demand from the urban middle-class, statistics show.

In the past three years -- from fiscal 2006-07 to fiscal 2008-09 -- average housing loans provided by the private sector rose by nearly 26 percent a year.

The highest growth -- 39 percent -- was witnessed in fiscal 2006-07, while the following two years achieved 17.6 percent and 21 percent growth, despite the impacts of global recession on real estate, according to Bangladesh Bank data.

There are several specialised private housing finance companies offering loans for construction, renovation and purchase of residential accommodation, mainly in Dhaka. Of them, Delta-Brac Housing Finance Corporation (DBH), IDLC Finance and National Housing Finance and Investments Ltd are the market leaders.

The outstanding loan figure of

Delta-Brac Housing Finance stood at Tk 1,220 crore or nearly 70 percent of the total loans provided by specialised private housing financiers on June 30, 2009.

Home loans by IDLC and National Housing Finance reached Tk 390 crore and Tk 170 crore respectively at the same time.

Earlier, Bangladesh House

Building Finance Corporation (BHBFC), the lone state-owned house loan provider, enjoyed monopoly. But its market share is shrinking by the day, BB data shows.

BHBFC's housing loans stood at Tk 2,490 crore at the end of 2008-09, which was Tk 2,630 crore and Tk 2,520 crore in 2005-06 and 2006-07 respectively.

On the other hand, total housing loans grew for all, including specialised public and private organisations, public and private banks, other financial institutions and microfinance institution Grameen Bank, by a whopping 80 percent to Tk 18,180 crore in fiscal 2008-09 from Tk 10,090 crore three years ago.

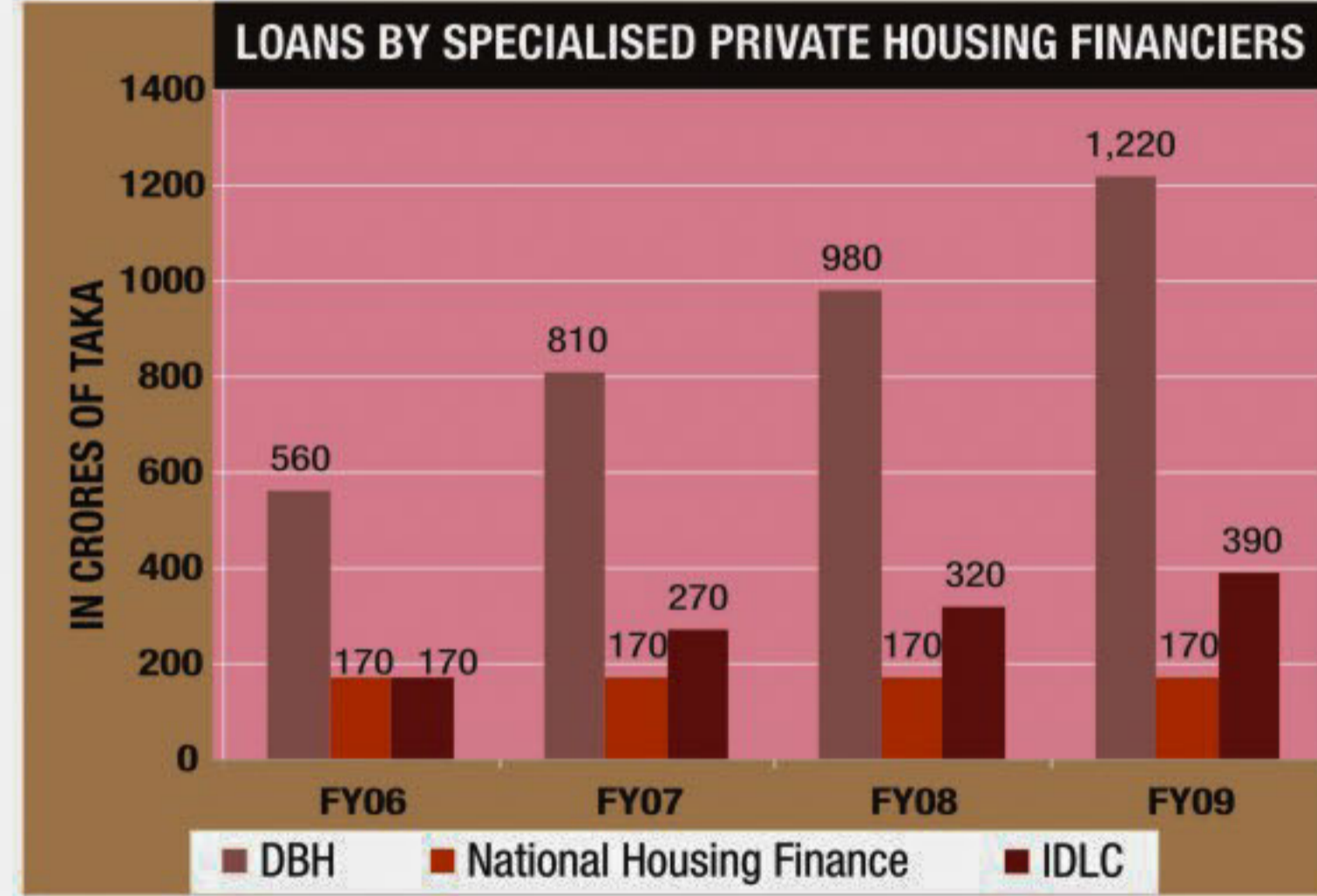
Recently, banks, particularly the private ones, have aggressively come up with home loans. These banks are seen as significant competitors to housing financiers. At the end of June 2009, private banks' market share crossed 41 percent, up from 35 percent three years ago.

Private loan providers said prompt and hassle-free services helped them attract customers.

"A phone call to our office is enough to obtain counselling," said a senior DBH official.

The terms of housing loans are generally between 1 year and 20 years and the interest rate varies from 14 percent to 17 percent a year, differing from organisation to organisation.

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# 33 internet providers to roll out voice services

MD HASAN

The users connected to the internet through local internet service providers (ISPs) can now talk to each other and telecom subscribers, as the telecom regulator made a tariff directive to commercially launch IP telephony services.

Under the tariff plan, 33 licensees, known as internet protocol telephony service providers (IPTSPs), can now sell voice services.

Service providers can charge a maximum of Tk 0.20 a minute for domestic IPTSP to IPTSP calls and a maximum of Tk 2 for a call from IPTSP to any mobile or landline operator, in line with a Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) directive.

However, the minimum airtime charge for calls from IPTSP to any mobile or landline operator will not be below Tk 0.65 a minute, according to the BTRC.

For international outgoing calls, IPTSP will have to follow the rates for international calls, as issued earlier

by BTRC.

However, the new tariff directive frustrates IP telephony licence holders, as such charges will not be financially viable. Different telecom operators are charging lower than the tariff set for IPTSP.

"If we offer IPTSP to IPTSP calls almost free of cost, it will help boost internet penetration," said Akhtaruzzaman Manju, president of Internet Service Providers Bangladesh.

In addition, other IP-based voice services to other operators will not be viable due to the uncompetitive tariff directive, he said. "It's not a very good proposition in terms of tariff."

It would have been better if the per minute charge was fixed between Tk 0.30 to Tk 0.60, said Manju.

The services are to be value-added services at low costs, it will gain popularity in some areas such as intracompany communication, he said.

IP telephony licence owners can provide PC (personal computer) to phone, phone to PC, phone to phone or any other use to subscribers, based on the IP telephony voice service.

From a technical point of view, experts said, the voice over internet protocol (VoIP) is set to open through legal channels as IP and VoIP technologies have nearly the same features.

BTRC last year made a guideline to award IP telephony licences exclusively to local ISPs. Customers now can talk by using their internet connection just after installing a modem for voice transmission.

Presently, more than five lakh internet users are connected through local ISPs. On the other hand, mobile operators claimed more than 40 lakh are connected via mobile internet. Bangladesh's internet penetration rate is only 4 percent.

Abdus Salam, managing director of Agni Systems Ltd, a IP telephony licensee, said: "We should not charge extra for voice as our customers already have to pay for an internet connection."

He said that people should be allowed to use the technology first.

"We hope it will soon become popular as it is affordable."

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## Khulna IT fair ends

BSS, Khulna

The five-day Khulna Digital Expo Fair-2010 came to a close yesterday.

Laptops, cameras and electronic notebooks are three of the best sellers of the fair held at Hotel Tiger Garden. As many as 25 stalls had been set up at the fair.

Earlier, Khulna City Mayor Talukder Abdul Khaleque inaugurated the fair on February 17 that was organised by Bangladesh Computer Samity.

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