BANK ASIA

A Rouf Chowdhury, chairman of Bank Asia, speaks at the bank's "Employee Day-2019" at International Convention City Bashundhara in Dhaka on Saturday organised part of its monthlong 20th anniversary celebration. Former chairmen M Syeduzzaman and Anisur Rahman Sinha, Board Executive Committee Chairman Rumee A Hossain, directors Ashraful Haq Chowdhury, Enam Chowdhury and Romana Rouf Chowdhury, former president and managing directors Syed Anisul Huq and Erfanuddin Ahmed, and President and Managing Director Md Arfan Ali were present.

China exports fall, but import growth hints of recovering demand

REUTERS, *Beijing*

China's exports in November shrank for the fourth consecutive month, underscoring persistent pressures on manufacturers from the Sino-US war but growth in imports may be a sign that Beijing's stimulus steps are helping to stoke demand.

The 17-month long trade dispute has heightened the risks of a global recession and fueled speculation that China's policymakers could unleash more stimulus as growth in the world's second-largest economy cooled to nearly 30-year lows.

Overseas shipments fell 1.1 percent from a year earlier last month, customs data showed on Sunday, compared with a 1.0 percent expansion tipped by a Reuters poll of analysts and a 0.9 percent drop in October.

Imports unexpectedly rose 0.3 percent from a year earlier, marking the first year-on-year growth since April and compared with a 1.8 percent decline forecast by economists.

The better-than-expected import data may point to firming domestic demand after factory activity showed surprising signs of improvement recently, although analysts have noted the recovery could be difficult to sustain amid trade risks.

China's trade surplus for November stood at $38.73 billion, compared with an expected $46.30 billion surplus in the poll and a $42.81 billion surplus recorded in October. Beijing and Washington are negotiating a first phase trade deal aimed at de-escalating a trade dispute but they continue to wrangle over key details.

A US House bill targeting China's camps for ethnic Muslim minorities in Xinjiang and other bills supporting anti-government protesters in Hong Kong have also angered Beijing, further clouding prospects for a deal.

US President Donald Trump said on Thursday trade talks with China are "moving right along," striking an upbeat tone even as Chinese officials held fast to their line that existing tariffs must come off as part of an interim deal. Earlier in the week, though, Trump rattled global markets when he said a deal might have to wait until after the 2020 election.

Top White House economic adviser Larry Kudlow said on Friday that a Dec. 15 deadline is still in place to impose a new round of US tariffs on some $156 billion of China's remaining exports to the United States, but the president likes where trade talks with China are going, he added.

One Chinese official told Reuters that China will implement its own tariffs as a countermeasure if the Dec. 15 tariffs go into place, which may dash any chance of a near-term trade deal.

Trump has demanded that China commit to specific minimum purchases of US agricultural products, among other concessions on intellectual property rights, currency and access to China's financial services markets.

China's trade surplus with the United States for November stood at $24.60 billion, according to Reuters calculations based on customs data, easing from the previous month's surplus of $26.45 billion.

China confirmed on Friday that it will waive import tariffs for some soybeans and pork shipments from the United States.

Imports of copper rose 12.1 percent on the previous month as an improvement in the manufacturing sector stoked higher demand for the red metal, customs data showed on Sunday.

China's official factory activity gauge returned to growth for the first time in seven months in November, with a private survey showing activity expanding at the quickest pace in almost three years.

But falling industrial profits and factory prices suggest persisting downward pressure on the sector.

Iron ore imports fell for a second straight month in November, pulled down by falling shipments from top miners in Australia and Brazil despite firm demand at mills.

REUTERS/FILE

Containers are seen at the Yangshan Deep Water Port in Shanghai, China.

US debate on internet liability spills over to global trade deals

AFP, *Washington*

US lawmakers seeking to rein in Big Tech have been stepping up efforts to limit legal immunity for online services, and now are taking that fight global.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi this week backed a move by fellow lawmakers to carve out the so-called Section 230 protection -- which some activists say is a cornerstone of the open internet -- from a North American trade pact with Canada and Mexico, known as USMCA.

"There are concerns in the House about enshrining the increasingly controversial Section 230 liability shield in our trade agreements, particularly at a time when Congress is considering whether changes need to be made in US law," Pelosi spokesman Henry Connelly said.

Debate on Section 230, a clause in the 1996 Communications Decency Act, has been raging for months amid rising concerns about the failure of tech platforms to curb hate speech, extremist content, copyright infringement and other abuses. The effort to modify the law -- which immunizes online services from third-party content on their sites -- has drawn support from both Democrats and Republicans.

Republican Senator Josh Hawley proposed legislation earlier this year that would end the immunity unless companies submit to an "external audit" which shows they are acting in a "politically neutral" manner.

"With Section 230, tech companies get a sweetheart deal that no other industry enjoys: complete exemption from traditional publisher liability in exchange for providing a forum free of political censorship," Hawley said in introducing the legislation. "Unfortunately, and unsurprisingly, big tech has failed to hold up its end of the bargain."

Civil liberties activists said Hawley's bill is unconstitutional and would put the government in charge of regulating speech. Other analysts point out that Section 230 has enabled the internet to thrive and that modifying it could be devastating for the internet and online speech.

"The services that we enjoy the most exist because of Section 230," said Eric Goldman, director of the High-Tech Law Institute at Santa Clara University. Goldman said Section 230 has become a "proxy" for the frustrations with Facebook and Google but that "American consumers would be the losers" if the law is weakened.

Corynne McSherry of the Electronic Frontier Foundation told a congressional hearing in October that Section 230 protects not only major tech platforms, but any online activity -- from forwarding an email to commenting in a news forum to sharing pictures and videos of friends -- from "third party liability." McSherry said that without Section 230, tech firms such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter would not exist in their current form because they would not be able to host user content without fear of a lawsuit.

She argued that eliminating Section 230 would "cement the dominance" of these firms, because it would mean higher costs to filter and moderate content that new startups could not afford.

According to Katherine Oyama, Google's head of intellectual property policy, the internet would be a far different experience without the liability shield.

"Without Section 230, platforms could face liability for decisions around removal of content from their platforms," she told lawmakers.

"Review sites like Yelp, TripAdvisor or Angie's List might be sued for defamation claims brought by a restaurant, hotel or an electrician trying to suppress their negative reviews." Oyama said the current law encourages sites to filter content, but that without the legal protection they might stop all content moderation or simply block anything potentially harmful.

AFP/FILE

Some US lawmakers want to limit the liability protection enjoyed by online services for content posted by others, but critics say that could devastate the open internet.

Iran outlines budget to resist US sanctions as oil exports plunge

REUTERS, *Dubai*

Iran's president presented a draft state budget of about $39 billion to parliament on Sunday, saying it was designed to resist US sanctions by limiting dependence on oil exports.

Officials have not given figures for the oil price and export volumes used in the calculations, although the IMF has indicated Iran would need oil prices to be triple current levels to balance its budget as its crude exports have plunged.

The United States reimposed sanctions with the aim of driving down Iranian crude sales, the Islamic Republic's main source of revenues, after Washington withdrew last year from a nuclear pact between world powers and Iran.

"This is a budget to resist sanctions ... with the least possible dependence on oil," Iranian President Hassan Rouhani told parliament, according to state television.

"This budget announces to the world that despite sanctions we can manage the country," he said.

He gave the value of the nominally balanced draft budget at 4,845 trillion rials, equivalent to $38.8 billion at the free market exchange rate, for the Iranian year starting on March 20.

The new budget is 10 percentbigger than this financial year in local currency terms although its dollar value is lower due to annual inflation that is running at about 35 percent.

The budget forecasts revenues for oil, gas and condensates falling 40 percent, leaving a gap it plans to plug by using state bonds and selling state properties.

Preliminary reports by local news agencies said the budget appeared to be based on oil sales of 500,000 to 1 million barrels per day (bpd). Under US sanctions, analysts estimate Iran's oil exports have tumbled to about 400,000 million bpd or even lower, from more than 2.5 million bpd.

The International Monetary Fund has said Iran would need an oil price of $194.6 a barrel to balance its budget in 2020/2021 and forecast a fiscal deficit of 4.5 percentof gross domestic product in 2019/2020 and 5.1 percentin 2020/2021.

Benchmark Brent oil LCOc1 closed at $64.38 on Friday. Analysts have said Iran had probably been forced to sell its crude at a discount to normal levels, as it seeks to entice buyers wary of violating US sanctions.

Although US sanctions on Iran's oil industry have slashed the OPEC member's crude exports by more than 80 percent, oil product sales remain strong, generating nearly $500 million a month, shipping data and Reuters calculations showed in September.

Unlike Iranian crude, which has distinct characteristics that mean its origin can be traced, the source of refined and other oil products are more difficult to identify.

NRBC BANK

NRBC Bank Chairman Parvez Tamal opens the bank's 72nd branch at Dewan Tower of Chapainawabganj's Nachol Bazar yesterday.

Uttar Pradesh keeps cane prices unchanged

REUTERS, *New Delhi*

India's top sugar producing state, Uttar Pradesh, has kept unchanged the price that mills must pay to cane growers in the new current season that began in October, according to a government order seen by Reuters on Saturday.

For the 2019/20 season, Uttar Pradesh fixed the cane price at 315 rupees ($4.42) per 100 kgs, said the order dated Dec. 7.

In India, the world's biggest sugar consumer, the federal government announces the price that cane growers receive each year, but Uttar Pradesh's state government typically fixes its own rate. The state government said in the order it decided to keep the cane price unchanged to help cut back on the country's surplus sugar output.

Troubled Hong Kong Airlines allowed to keep operating

AFP, *Hong Kong*

Low-cost carrier Hong Kong Airlines was allowed to continue flying after the city's authorities decided Saturday not to punish it for delaying salary payments and ongoing financial problems.

The international finance hub has seen six months of protests which has dealt a massive blow to the tourism sector and airline operators.

"The Civil Aviation Department has been satisfied that Hong Kong Airlines is able to continue to operate properly and safely," a spokesman from the Hong Kong Civil Aviation Department said on Saturday.

The city's Air Transport Licensing Authority (ATLA) said on the same day that the airline has met the conditions for raising and maintaining its cash level.

The authority added that it will continue to monitor the carrier's operation closely.

In late November, the carrier said its business was "severely affected" by the social unrest in the city and a sustained weak travel demand, which also impacted its payroll.

The licensing authority later required the airline to raise a significant amount of funds with a deadline in order to prevent its financial situation from deteriorating and to protect public interests.

Hong Kong Airlines is owned by struggling Chinese conglomerate HNA Group, which has been looking to lower its debt burden. Earlier this year, it unloaded another budget carrier -- HK Express -- to rival Cathay Pacific and it also cut some operations.

On Wednesday, in a letter to staff and colleagues, the carrier's chairman Hou Wei said "an initial cash injection plan has been drawn up." Although the amount of cash was not disclosed, the chairman said the company would pay outstanding salaries to staff on Thursday and the airline's services will gradually return to normal as soon as the funds arrive.

The tourism industry in Hong Kong has been battered by nearly six months of pro-democracy protests that have become increasingly violent, with visitor arrivals falling by half.

The crisis comes as the economy was already feeling pressure from the China-US trade war.

JANATA BANK

Jamaluddin Ahmed, chairman of Janata Bank, and Md Abdus Salam Azad, CEO, attend the "Branch Manager Conference-2019" for Sylhet division in the city on Saturday.