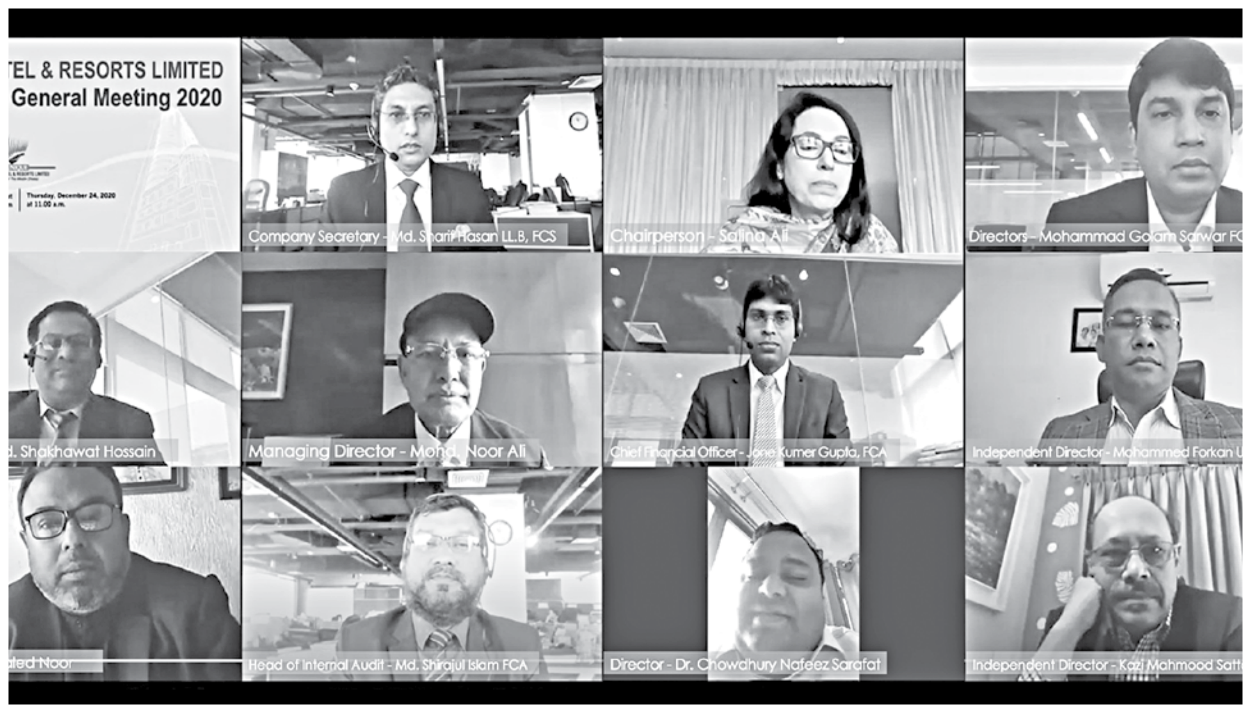
ENVOY TEXTILES

Kutubuddin Ahmed, chairman of Envoy Textiles, presides over the company's 25th annual general meeting through a digital platform recently. The company approved 5 per cent cash dividend for the year ending on June 30, 2020. Abdus Salam Murshedy, managing director, was present.



UNIQUE HOTEL AND RESORTS

Salina Ali, chairperson of the Unique Hotel and Resorts, presides over its 19th annual general meeting through a digital platform recently. The company approved 10 per cent cash dividend for the year ending on June 30, 2020. Managing Director Mohd Noor Ali was present.

MTB gets new chairman, vice chairman

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Md Wakiluddin

Md Abdul Malek

Md Wakiluddin and Md Abdul Malek have recently been elected chairman and vice chairman of Mutual Trust Bank respectively.

Wakiluddin is chairman of Baridhara Corporation and Baridhara Agro & Food Processing Ltd, managing director of Swadesh Properties and Swadesh Global Media, director of HURDCO International School and president of the editorial board of the Daily Swadesh Pratidin.

Malek was the chairman of Sheltech Consultants (Pvt) and attained a civil engineering degree from the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, says a press release.

Ford, Mahindra call off auto joint venture

REUTERS

Ford Motor Co said on Thursday it was calling off its automotive joint venture with India's Mahindra and Mahindra Ltd due to the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The companies said in separate statements that the decision was driven by changes in the global economy over the last 15 months, causing both to reassess their capital allocation priorities.

"The global economy and business environment are not the same as October last year," Ford spokesman T.R. Reid said. The deadline to finalize a joint venture between the companies was Dec. 31, and both made the decision to end the agreement rather than close a deal or extend the timetable to do so, Reid said.

In October 2019, Ford and Mahindra said they would form a joint venture in India in a move to cut costs for developing and producing vehicles for emerging markets. The companies said at the time they expected to launch three new utility vehicles, starting with a midsize SUV, and also jointly develop electric vehicles for emerging markets.

Asked if those vehicles were now canceled, Reid said, "At this point, there's nothing to talk about other than the joint venture isn't going to happen." Ford said its independent operations in India will continue.

New Year, new rules: UK begins post-Brexit future

AFP, *London*

Britain on Friday began a new year and life outside Europe, after leaving the bloc's single market trading rules to go it alone for the first time in nearly half a century.

Brexit, which has dominated politics on both sides of the Channel since 2016, became reality an hour before midnight, ending the UK's 48-year obligation to follow Brussels' rules.

Free movement of over 500 million people between Britain and the 27 EU states ended.

More rigorous customs checks returned for the first time in decades, despite the hard-fought brokering of a tariff- and quota-free trade deal.

New Year's Day newspapers reflected the historic but still deeply divisive change, which will have repercussions for generations to come.

The pro-Brexit Daily Express' front-page photograph showed the White Cliffs of Dover -- an enduring symbol of Britishness -- with "Freedom" written on a Union flag. "Our Future. Our Britain. Our Destiny," said the headline.

The pro-EU Independent was less sure: "Off the hook -- or cut adrift?" it asked, reflecting widespread uncertainty at the path the country had now chosen.

As dawn broke on 2021, attention turned to Britain's borders, particularly the key Channel seaports, to see if the end to seamless trade and travel would cause delays and disruption.

But with New Year's Day a public holiday followed by a weekend, and the government having announced the phased introduction of checks, few immediate problems were envisaged. "The traffic forecast for the next few days is very light," said John Keefe, spokesman for Eurotunnel, which transports freight, cars and coaches under the Channel.

As the first ferry left the port of Dover early Friday, truckers rolling into Calais had to deal for the first time with the new rules for transporting goods to and from mainland Europe.

The Road Haulage Association, an industry body, estimates that some 220 million new forms will now need to be filled in every year to allow trade to flow with EU countries, including permits to even drive on the roads leading to ports like Dover. "This is a revolutionary change," Rod McKenzie, managing director of public policy at the RHA, told The Times newspaper this week. Other practical changes include how long Britons can visit their holiday homes on the continent, to travel with pets, and an end to British involvement in an EU student programme.

Holidaymakers and business travellers used to seamless EU travel could face delays, although fears Britons will have to get international permits to drive in Europe were averted by a separate accord.

British fishermen are disgruntled at a compromise in the free trade agreement to allow continued access for EU boats in British waters, which has raised fears of clashes at sea.

The key financial services sector also faces an anxious wait to learn on what basis it can keep dealing with Europe, after being largely omitted from the trade deal along with services in general, which account for 80 percent of Britain's economy.

In Northern Ireland, the border with Ireland will be closely watched to ensure movement is unrestricted -- key to a 1998 peace deal that ended 30 years of violence over British rule.

And in pro-EU Scotland, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon gave a clear sign of a looming battle ahead for a new vote on independence. "Scotland will be back soon, Europe. Keep the light on," she tweeted.

Despite the uncertainty, Prime Minister Boris Johnson is bullishly optimistic, writing in Friday's Daily Telegraph that Brexit presented "opportunities unknown to modern memory.

He said Britain had been given "a safe European home" since joining the then Common Market in 1973, but added that "the world has changed out of all recognition, and so has the UK. "We need to keep pace with developments on the west coast of America and in the Pearl River delta," he added. "We need the Brexit-given chance to turbo-charge those sectors in which we excel." Divisions over Brexit, both political and social, remain deep and are likely to last for years, despite a muted end to the saga overshadowed by the global health crisis.

Opinion polls indicate that most Britons want to move on and are far more worried about the worsening coronavirus pandemic, which has left more than 73,500 dead in Britain alone. Johnson, who survived several days in intensive care with Covid last April, warned of tough times ahead but said a UK-developed vaccine offered grounds for hope.

But his desire for a prosperous, more globally focused Britain could yet see a resurgence of Brexit wrangling, as the country finds out what its new trading terms mean in reality.

REUTERS/FILE

A man walks inside a near-deserted Spitalfields Market in London yesterday.

After golden year for precious metals, silver set to shine in 2021

REUTERS

After a spectacular year, precious metals are set for further gains in 2021, with silver tipped to outperform, but analysts are growing more cautious about the prospects for gold as the global economy recovers from the impact of the coronavirus.

The pandemic triggered stockpiling by investors looking to protect their wealth. This, alongside supply deficits, pushed gold and palladium prices up by more than 20 per cent this year, while silver rose 47 per cent, and platinum 10 per cent.

"We are going to see new record highs for gold and palladium (in 2021)," said Philip Newman at consultants Metals Focus. "But silver will see the chunkiest gains," he said.

Traditionally seen as a safe place to store money, gold began to rise as economic growth slowed in 2019, but the pandemic accelerated the rally and in August prices hit a record high of $2,072.50.

While demand for physical gold was hammered as the virus forced shutdowns, investment demand surged as reflected in the holdings of the world's largest gold-backed exchange-traded fund, SPDR Gold Trust, which recorded its biggest yearly gain since 2009 at about 30 per cent.

Prices then dipped to around $1,900 as investors stopped buying and vaccines were deployed against the virus, encouraging investment in assets that perform well during periods of economic growth.

Huge government debt, negative real returns on bonds and threats of inflation and market turbulence, all of which support gold, will persist in 2021, said Ross Norman, an independent analyst. Gold could rise another 20 per cent next year, he said.

A safe-haven asset like gold, but also an industrial metal used in products including solar panels, silver climbed from $18 an ounce in January to almost $30 in August before slipping to around $25.

Analysts say its dual role and its greater volatility mean it could fare better than gold as economic growth picks up, and as US President-elect Joe Biden's push into clean energy prompts more usage. Investors soaked up a surplus of platinum, which is also used in jewellery, industry and by auto makers to reduce pollution.

But they are unlikely to do so again, particularly as supply, which fell because of the novel coronavirus, bounces back, said StoneX analyst Rhona O'Connell.

That will likely drag on prices, which at around $1,000 an ounce are only slightly higher than at the start of the year.

The auto industry uses four-fifths of palladium, which, like platinum, neutralises engine emissions. It is used little for investment.

Years of undersupply drove prices to a record high of $2,875.50 an ounce in February. "The market thought it might run out of metal," said one trader. Most analysts expect shortfalls to continue in 2021 as the global economy revives and auto sales rebound.

JAMUNA BANK

Md Fazlur Rahman Chowdhury, managing director of Jamuna Bank, opens a branch at Kashinathpur in Pabna.

US jobless claims dip but show recovery has long way to go

REUTERS

Fewer Americans sought unemployment benefits last week, but the modest drop did little to dispel concerns that the U.S. job market and wider economy face an arduous recovery from the devastation inflicted by the coronavirus pandemic in 2020.

The final major economic data point for a year that saw a recession of historic magnitude erupt out of nowhere stood as a fitting reminder for both how far the recovery has progressed and how much more it has to go.

While new claims for benefits reported by the U.S. Labor Department on Thursday dropped for the second week in a row to a seasonally adjusted 787,000 in the week ended Dec. 26 from 806,000 a week before, it left them at roughly the level they were three months ago and with little indication they would show material improvement any time soon.

The arrival of effective COVID-19 vaccines and additional federal pandemic aid have set the stage for a brighter 2021. But economists agree the still-raging epidemic and the fractured government response to it means more difficult months ahead before improvement takes hold.

"While prospects for the economy later in 2021 are upbeat, the economy and labor market will have to navigate some difficult terrain between now and then and we expect claims to remain elevated," Nancy Vanden Houten, lead U.S. economist at Oxford Economics, said in a note.

COVID-19's unexpected appearance late last year and rapid spread in early 2020 brought an abrupt end to a record-long U.S. economic expansion that had fostered the strongest job market in generations. It also brought down the global economy, dashing hopes for a second straight decade of uninterrupted growth and widening prosperity.

The report also showed that as of mid-December, more than 19.5 million people were receiving some form of jobless aid, including from emergency measures extended by the latest coronavirus aid bill that was passed by Congress and signed by President Donald Trump. Those emergency programs now account for roughly two-thirds of all ongoing jobless assistance.

As of Dec. 19, the number of people continuing to draw benefits under regular state unemployment insurance programs declined to 5.219 million, the lowest since March, from 5.322 million the week before. Economists took little solace from that decline, however, seeing it more the result of people exhausting benefits rather than finding new work.

The elevated level of claims aligns with other recent weak economic reports, including a decline in consumer confidence to a four-month low in December and drops in both consumer spending and income last month.

With persistently high COVID-19 infection levels forcing renewed restrictions on businesses and consumer activity around the country, some economists now see a chance that overall U.S. employment has fallen this month for the first time since April, when 20.8 million people lost jobs in a single month. While payrolls have risen each month since then, the total level of employment remains roughly 10 million jobs below its pre-pandemic level.

Aneta Markowska, chief financial economist at Jefferies, said this week the company's in-house economic activity index, which tracks the recovery through high-frequency measures, has fallen to a three-week low, led by weakness in measures of consumer spending and employment.

"Taken at face value, our data suggest further downside for retail sales and raise the prospect of an outright contraction in December employment," Markowska wrote. "However, with more fiscal stimulus on the way, we expect the negative momentum to reverse in January."