STOCKS	Week-on-week
DSEX ▲ 0.96% 5,568.85	CSCX ▲ 1.21% 9,749.95

COMMODITIES	As of Friday
Gold ▲ $1,726.41 (per ounce)	Oil ▲ $69.22 (per barrel)

ASIAN MARKETS			Friday Closings
MUMBAI	TOKYO	SINGAPORE	SHANGHAI
▼ 0.95%	▲ 1.73%	▼ 0.35%	▲ 0.47%
50,792.08	29,717.83	3,095.22	3,453.08

CURRENCIES — As on Thursday, STANDARD CHARTERED BANK

	USD	EUR	GBP	CNY
BUY TK	83.95	99.08	116.08	12.68
SELL TK	84.95	102.88	119.88	13.33

Star BUSINESS

DHAKA SUNDAY MARCH 14, 2021, *FALGUN 29, 1427 BS* ● starbusiness@thedailystar.net

Sugarcane farmers suffer massive losses

Late harvest worsens quality, brings down sugar yield rate

KONGKON KARMAKER, *from Dinajpur*

Sugarcane growers based in six catchment areas have suffered heavy losses this year as the total weight of the crops shrivelled because of a late harvest, bringing down sugar yield.

The sugar yield or recovery rate of most mills was below 5.20 per cent, except for the North Bengal Sugar Mills in Natore.

The average recovery rate, which refers to sugar produced after processing a definite weight of sugarcane, in Bangladesh is half of India and Brazil, the world's top two sugarcane producers.

"Aside from growers, the mills also suffered heavy losses this season due to the low recovery rate as sugarcanes dried up because of late harvesting," said a managing director of a sugar mill in the northern district.

Sugar production at six mills was suspended to bring down losses for the 2020-21 fiscal year. However, things happened in reverse as nine other mills also were in the red, they added.

Sugarcane usually remains juicy if it is harvested before January 15.

The nine sugar mills procured sugarcane from the catchment areas within the standard harvesting period, various sources said. There are a total of 15 sugar mills in the county.

At the end of November last year, the Bangladesh Sugar and Food Industry Corporation (BSFIC) decided to shutter six of the mills in order to avert operational losses.

The six mills are Setabganj Sugar Mills, Shyampur Sugar Mills, Rangpur Sugar Mills, Panchagarh Sugar Mills, Pabna Sugar Mills, and Kushtia Sugar Mills.

The BSFIC also decided to procure sugarcane from the catchment areas that previously fed the six shuttered mills in order to supply the nine remaining functional units.

Sugarcane crushing started at these mills between December 11 and 18 last year.

Sugarcane sourced from Dinajpur, Thakurgaon and Panchagarh is crushed at Thakurgaon Mills, while harvests from Rangpur, Gaibandha and Joypurhat are crushed at Joypurhat Mills.

READ MORE ON B3

COLLECTED

Sugarcane is seen being tossed into a turner for processing at Joypurhat Sugar Mil. Yields were low for the current season due to a late harvest, leading to a dip in mills' recovery rates.

No overnight relief from losses

Says chairman of Bangladesh Sugar and Food Industries Corporation

JAGARAN CHAKMA

The Bangladesh Sugar and Food Industries Corporation (BSFIC) will not get relief from the losses anytime soon despite closing six mills.

The sugar mills of the BSFIC have been facing losses for years as management of the mills showed excess expenditure than actual and the collective bargaining agent (CBA) leaders pocketed public money by charging extra for the sugarcane they indirectly supplied, although they are not supposed to do so.

Both, management of mills and the CBA leaders were responsible for the losses of the mills, the BSFIC said in its assessment.

For this reason, the government had to run the mills giving a considerable subsidy.

"The mills will not get relief from the losses this year, although sugarcane crushing has stopped at six mills as it is not possible to reduce the losses instantly," said Md Arifur Rahman Apu, chairman of the BSFIC.

However, the expenditure will reduce slightly due to the closure of six mills.

The BSFIC has a target to produce around 50,000 tonnes of sugar this year from nine existing mills. The government shut six mills in a bid to reduce losses.

READ MORE ON B3

REASONS FOR LOSSES: FY16 TO FY20

SOURCE: BSFIC ASSESSMENT

- Production cost for each kg of sugar Tk **131.40** to Tk **319.34**
- BSFIC sold sugar at Tk **52.78** to Tk **57.54** per kg
- Loss was Tk **78.86** to Tk **216.18** per kg
- Mills management and CBA leaders responsible for losses

Tk 5,883cr digital connectivity project on way

REJAUL KARIM BYRON *and* MAHMUDUL HASAN

The government is set to undertake a huge Tk 5,883 crore digital connectivity project, in a move that could equip every corner of the country with the latest ICT infrastructure, making almost all government services digital and increasing the use of ICT at field levels.

Under the project, the government will establish 109,244 broadband and user connections, 10,000 digital labs, 57 specialised labs, a central cloud platform and frontier technology centre of excellence, IT infrastructure in district and upazila complexes and training facilities.

With the new IT infrastructure covering eight divisions, 64 districts and all upazilas, including union and village levels, the government wants to make its services accessible to the people in a quicker and easier manner by converting them into e-services.

The project proposal will be placed at the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council on Tuesday for approval.

The implementation period of the project starts from January 2021 and ends in December 2024 with the ICT department of the division being in charge of the implementing agency.

READ MORE ON B3

THE PROJECT WILL...

- Provide **109,244** broadband connections to govt offices
- Establish **10,000** Sheikh Russel Digital Labs in schools
- Set up **57** specialised IT labs
- Establish **555** digital service & training centres
- Construct a **21**-storey tower in capital's Purbachal
- Turn **10** localities into digital villages

Capital machinery import yet to get momentum

AKM ZAMIR UDDIN

Import of capital machinery, industrial raw materials and intermediate goods is yet to get momentum despite the pickup in economic activity in Bangladesh because of the persisting coronavirus pandemic.

This will only further its already adverse impact on the economy in the days to come as uncertainty is deepening after the deadly flu started spreading once again, both locally and globally.

Between July and December of the current fiscal year, the import of capital machinery stood at $2.65 billion, down 36.62 per cent year-on-year, data from the central bank showed.

The import of capital goods, however, increased 10 per cent during the period.

"The trend indicates that businesspeople are yet to get back their confidence to set up new industrial units or expand their existing ones," said Asif Ibrahim, chairman of the Chittagong Stock Exchange.

Coronavirus infections are surging in some European countries, which are forcing them to impose lockdowns for the second or third times.

READ MORE ON B3

STAR/FILE

Between July and December of the current fiscal year, import of capital machinery stood at $2.65 billion, down 36.62 per cent year-on-year.

Govt takes Tk 438cr project to cultivate fallow lands

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The government has taken on a Tk 438 crore project to cultivate fallow lands across the country, according to Agriculture Minister Muhammad Abdur Razzaque.

"Under this project, family nutrition gardens will be established in personal yards and fallow lands," he said.

Razzaque made these comments during the annual general meeting of the Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation (BADC) Krishibid Samiti, held at the Bangabandhu International Conference Center in Dhaka yesterday.

"As a result, food production will further increase," he added.

The project was taken in line with a directive from Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to bring every inch of land under cultivation in order to face the Covid-19 induced food shortage.

Bangladesh has 87.96 lakh hectares of arable land, of which 83.41 lakh hectares are already under cultivation. The remaining 4.55 lakh hectares of land remains fallow, data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics shows.

READ MORE ON B3

Bangladesh has 87.96 lakh hectares of arable land, of which 83.41 lakh hectares are already under cultivation.

BSEC looking into complaints raised over Padma Bank

The commission chairman says at ERF dialogue

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission (BSEC) is investigating complaints regarding Padma Bank and it will take action as per the law, Shibli Rubayat-Ul-Islam, chairman of the commission, said yesterday.

The BSEC received a letter from Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir, founder and former chairman of Padma Bank, and a separate letter from the bank about the complaint, he said.

He spoke at the maiden "Economic Reporters' Forum (ERF) Dialogue on Business and Economy" at the ERF office in Dhaka.

However, the BSEC chairman did not disclose details about the complaint.

Alamgir has accused incumbent Chairman Chowdhury Nafeez Sarafat of misusing Tk 100 crore from the troubled lender.

Alamgir, who established Farmers Bank in 2013 that was later renamed as Padma Bank for gross financial irregularities, made the accusation in a letter to the central bank on March 7.

At the event, Shibli Rubayat-Ul-Islam also said the commission targets to bring to the market at least six local big industrial conglomerates with annual turnover of over $2.5 billion.

The step has been taken to increase the number of quality shares in the stock market, he said.

"Of the six, one with above $4 billion in annual turnover has already contacted the commission to come to the market."

However, he again declined mentioning the names of those companies.

"Many people think that Bangladesh does not have such big companies. But, the country now has many entities with $1 billion in annual turnover."

The companies have grown manifold with the gradual rise of the economy, he said.

Currently, the country now has a Tk 500,000 crore stock market, which was Tk 350,000 crore even a few months ago, indicating a positive trend in the market, he said.

"We are expecting a major change in our stock markets within the next two years as we have taken some bold steps to help the positive trend continue in the stock markets."

READ MORE ON B3

IDLC, Unicef to improve healthcare in seven Sylhet tea gardens

Star Business Desk

IDLC Finance and United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (Unicef) have entered into a partnership to improve maternal and neonatal health rights and nutrition for 7,000 women, 3,000 under-five children and 5,000 adolescents in seven tea gardens of Sylhet.

A memorandum of understanding in this regard was signed on Wednesday, according to a statement.

The IDLC will support renovation of water, sanitation and hygiene facilities and provide necessary medical equipment and logistics.

Unicef will ensure capacity building of health service providers connecting with government systems for sustainability.

Moreover, awareness campaigns will be run for 40,000 people on maternal, neonatal mortality and nutrition issues.

"We always try to go extra miles when it comes to helping the society where they need it most," said Jamal Uddin, deputy managing director at IDLC Finance.

"This partnership will be setting example of corporate sector's championing role in addressing critical national issues together with relevant stakeholders," he said.

"Partnerships like this one will help reimagine how socially responsible private sector entities can contribute to the establishment of a better society for all children no matter where they are born and raised," said Tomoo Hozumi, Unicef country representative in Bangladesh.

"Without healthy and well-educated children, it is not possible to envisage sustainable development in any society be it economic or social," he said.

"The private sector has a critical role to play in this regard together with the government and other actors in the society," he added.

QR codes, health passports: China's tech arsenal against a pandemic

Afp, *Beijing*

Daily life in China follows a rhythm of digital check-ins, with the QR code -- at offices, malls and transport hubs -- an integral defence against Covid-19 that helps to track, trace and isolate patients.

Now the country where the coronavirus was first detected is launching a digital "health passport" for its 1.4 billion population which it hopes will eventually re-start international travel.

Concerns over privacy and data harvesting have for now been overshadowed by China's relative success in bringing the virus to heel. Here's how technology has spearheaded the fight against the pandemic.

China has established a nationwide system of digital "health codes", scoring citizens on whether they pose a potential coronavirus threat based around their travel history and proximity to people with the virus. Users have to scan a QR code to get a "green" pass in the health app, a common practice at most offices, restaurants, shopping malls, sports centres and transport stations.

The system is linked with the user's ID and phone number, and is used to track their contacts, assess their health risk, and display the results of any recent Covid-19 tests or vaccines.

The nationwide app gathers geolocation data provided by phone operators, while other regional ones link to train and plane tickets, identity checks or screening tests.The digital health certificate extends that system by showing the holder's vaccine status and virus test results.

Technically, the tracking app is not mandatory. But in reality, it has become impossible to move around China without it. Airlines require it before boarding a domestic flight and a clean health code is needed to enter a train station. In Beijing, taxis ask passengers to "check in" using the app before making a journey.

Last spring, local media reported the case of a criminal who had been on the run for two decades, but ended up surrendering himself to the authorities after the health app had made it impossible for him to enter a store, get employment or move around without being detected.

In China, vast amounts of Chinese economic activity and payments are handled through digital apps such as WeChat. Consumers surrender data on their buying habits, travel, and other personal information for digital convenience. But worries over privacy and data security have been heightened by the health codes and fears it marks a rush of government surveillance into hundreds of millions of lives.

Last year, a law professor successfully sued a wildlife park for asking him to scan his face using facial recognition technology. The case was seen as a landmark challenge in the collection of personal data. Chinese people "are extremely attentive to" the privacy debate, Jean-Dominique Seval, a digital economy expert and a director at Soon Consulting told AFP. "There are discussions between lawyers and users on social networks. We can't say that [the system of app tracing] is completely 'Big Brother'... but it's not absolute data freedom either. "It's somewhere in between and it's constantly evolving.

With its experience in managing the epidemic, Beijing is pushing for the adoption of a universal health code at the global level: a health passport to open borders. The initiative was also proposed in November at the G20 summit by President Xi Jinping. But although the new certificate is meant for travel in and out of China, it is currently only available for use by Chinese citizens and it is not yet mandatory.

There is also no indication authorities in other countries will use it when Chinese travellers go abroad. "To make possible a border crossing instantly with this passport... will require discussions between many countries that are likely to be complicated and lengthy," Seval added.

REUTERS/FILE

People scan a QR code to display their health status as they line up to be tested for the Covid-19 coronavirus in Beijing.

Mamunur Rahman

Apsis Solutions gets new CEO

Star Business Desk

Information technology provider Apsis Solutions has recently appointed a new chief executive officer.

Mamunur Rahman will be managing business operations both at home and abroad, the company said in a statement yesterday. He previously served Australia-based TOLL Group in managing global IT operations and American Tobacco for 19 years.

African economies likely to rebound 3.4pc this year

Reuters, *Nairobi*

African economies are expected to grow by an average of 3.4 per cent this year, the African Development Bank said, as the continent recovers from its worst contraction in half a century.

The 54 economies shrank by 2.1 per cent last year, the AfDB said in its 2021 economic outlook report, as the coronavirus crisis disrupted economic activity across the continent.

"The continent-wide projected recovery... does not remove the threat of increasing poverty," the Abidjan-based AfDB said in the report, published on Friday.

Canada jobs market bounces back, unemployment lowest in a year

Afp, *Ottawa*

Canada added a net 259,000 jobs in February, blowing past forecasts as the unemployment rate fell 1.2 percentage points to 8.2 per cent -- its lowest rate since March 2020, the national statistical agency said Friday.

The rebound, after two months of falling job numbers, coincided with a gradual lifting of pandemic restrictions as Covid-19 infections trended lower. But employment was still down about 600,000 jobs from pre-pandemic levels, said Statistics Canada.

"The quick turnaround is reminiscent of the first wave (of Covid-19 illnesses) when employment rebounded far faster than expected as the economy began reopening," said CIBC analyst Royce Mendes.

Mendes suggested it could lead Canada's central bank to soon start tapering off its quantitative easing program -- bond purchases to boost money supplies, ending and investment. Several Canadian provinces have gradually lifted lockdowns ordered by public health authorities in December, allowing many businesses, cultural and recreational facilities, as well as restaurants to reopen.

But several parts of the economy continue to struggle. There were gains in both part-time (+171,000) and full-time (+88,000) jobs; the number of self-employed workers was unchanged for a second consecutive month; and the private sector added 226,000 new employees.

In February, total hours worked increased by 1.4 per cent, driven mostly by gains in wholesale and retail trade. More people also returned to their traditional workplaces, leaving their home offices set up during the pandemic, as schools and offices reopened.

How Toyota thrives when the chips are down

Reuters

Toyota may have pioneered the just-in-time manufacturing strategy but when it comes to chips, its decision to stockpile what have become key components in cars goes back a decade to the Fukushima disaster.

After the catastrophe severed Toyota's supply chains on March 11, 2011, the world's biggest automaker realised the lead-time for semiconductors was way too long to cope with devastating shocks such as natural disasters.

That's why Toyota came up with a business continuity plan (BCP) that required suppliers to stockpile anywhere from two to six months' worth of chips for the Japanese carmaker, depending on the time it takes from order to delivery, four sources said.

And that's why Toyota has so far been largely unscathed by a global shortage of semiconductors following a surge in demand for electrical goods under coronavirus lockdowns that has forced many rival automakers to suspend production, the sources said.

"Toyota was, as far as we can tell, the only automaker properly equipped to deal with chip shortages," said a person familiar with Harman International, which specialises in car audio systems, displays and driver assistance technology.

Two of the sources who spoke to Reuters are Toyota engineers and the others are at companies involved in the chip business.

Toyota surprised rivals and investors last month when it said its output would not be disrupted significantly by chip shortages even as Volkswagen, General Motors, Ford, Honda and Stellantis, among others, have been forced to slow or suspend some production.

Prepare to address LDC graduation-linked challenges

FROM PAGE B4

"But for Bangladesh to reach its current stage from that devastating position is such a great achievement," Mansur added.

The post-1972 assessment of Bangladesh was very frustrating as there was a general consensus that the international community would need to protect and support the country forever. However, foreign aid now accounts for just 1.5 per cent of the country's national income.

The noted economist also stressed the need to open up the local market for international players.

While tagging the local market as highly protected, Mansur said the country's average protection level is as high as around 27 per cent.

The average protection level in both India and China stands at 9 per cent, while it is 7.4 per cent for Asean countries.

"We need to build up a competitive economy as we can't progress much with a protected economy," Mansur said.

The export volume of both Bangladesh and Vietnam was just $1 billion in the early 1990s. Vietnam's current exports amount to $270 billion against Bangladesh's $40 billion.

"We need to reach that level," said Mansur, also a former official of the International Monetary Fund.

He also said that the country should work to strengthen its international political and economic diplomacy to achieve its various interests, such as securing the generalised system of preferences-Plus after graduation.

Mirza Azizul Islam, a former adviser to a caretaker government, said that since the country may face challenges such as the loss of duty-free access to different international markets after graduation, efforts should be given for bilateral, regional or sub-regional trade arrangements to attain duty-free or less-duty export facilities.

Islam went on to say that even after facing 14 to 15 per cent duty on exports to the US, the country is doing much better compared to its LDC peers.

Prof Mustafizur Rahman, a distinguished fellow of the Centre for Policy Dialogue, said Bangladesh needs to take preparatory measures in the next five years to ensure a smooth transition to the developing status and make graduation sustainable.

Rahman underscored the need to enhance the capacity of local institutions as well as strengthen their negotiation skills.

He also called for opening a negotiation cell like the WTO Cell under the commerce ministry to deal with the complex negotiations.

Sheikh Mamun Khaled, pro-vice-chancellor of the Canadian University of Bangladesh, and Prof Shibli Rubayat-Ul-Islam, chairman of the Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission, also spoke.

Apparel exports: resilience and future challenges

FROM PAGE B4

Thus, given how sensitive apparel demand appears to be to economic downturns, lowering Bangladesh's export concentration in that industry will be an important way to diversify its risks and crisis-proof the country's exports in the future.

The second policy challenge is the significant headwinds that are likely in store for Bangladesh's exports.

After the global financial crisis of 2008/2009, the world experienced a prolonged period of "slowbalisation", where trade growth slowed dramatically. Such a scenario is likely over the next few years.

Indeed, after a difficult winter in Europe and North America, growth in apparel orders for the spring have been disappointing and suggests that the rate of recovery seen at the end of 2020 will likely slow down.

The past year has been an incredibly challenging one for Bangladesh's exports. Cancelled orders and reduced employment had left both firms and workers in a precarious position. While the near-term prospects appear better than one would have expected at this time last year, there are nonetheless significant challenges ahead. But the resilience shown in 2020—both among producers and workers—provides a hopeful outlook for the future.

Reshad N Ahsan is an associate professor of the department of economics of the University of Melbourne and Kazi Iqbal is the senior research fellow of Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies.

BIDS launches book on Bangladesh's development journey

FROM PAGE B4

"These volumes are an apt tribute to our national hero who has inspired the struggle for an independent Bangladesh through his sacrifice, vision, and courage."

"Bangabandhu dreamt of a free, equitable and prosperous Bangladesh, and even during the brief period that he was in power before being assassinated on August 15 in 1975, he was able to put in place the basic structure of governance and broad policy directions that would admirably serve the country on its development journey."

"In dedicating these volumes to the memory of Bangabandhu, we not only recognise his wisdom and leadership but also acknowledge that the history of the last 50 years in every field, would have been different, had he not been present," said BIDS.

At the event, Centre for Policy Dialogue Chairman Prof Rehman Sobhan was the chief guest while Economic Affairs Adviser to the Prime Minister Mashiur Rahman and International Relation Affairs Adviser to the Prime Minister Gowher Rizvi were guests of honour. Secretary of Planning Division Mohammad Jainul Bari, Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation Chairman Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad, BIDS Research Director Binayak Sen also spoke.

Prime Bank's new MD

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Hassan O Rashid has recently joined Prime Bank as the managing director and chief executive officer.

Prior to the joining, Rashid was the additional managing director of Eastern Bank, according to a statement.

He started his career with Credit Agricole Indosuez. He also worked at HSBC and Standard Chartered in different senior leadership positions.

Rashid is a graduate of Capital University of the USA in economics and business administration.

He completed his master's degree in international management from Garvin School of Management, Thunderbird, the USA.

Boeing unveils order for troubled 737 MAX, shares jump

REUTERS

Boeing Co unveiled a new order for its 737 MAX on Friday, pushing its shares up 6 per cent as it renews efforts to recapture investor confidence following a two-year safety crisis.

The deal to sell 24 of the 737-8 model to a backer of Canadian low-cost carrier Flair Airlines comes after Reuters reported it was poised to win another, much larger deal with Southwest Airlines.

Shares in Boeing rose 6.2 per cent to $267.86.

Boeing has been trying to rebuild its image with passengers and airlines following the nearly two-year grounding of the MAX after crashes in Indonesia and Ethiopia killed 346 people.

This week marked the second anniversary of the second accident, with a final investigative report expected any day.

Boeing said Miami-based private equity firm 777 Partners, which has a stake in Flair Airlines, agreed to buy 24 737-8 airplanes with an option to purchase a further 60.

Flair, which was recently relaunched by veterans of European budget giant Wizz Air, is now operating one plane for domestic flights. It said it would lease 13 of the 24 aircraft from 777 Partners starting this year.

REUTERS/FILE

A Boeing 737 MAX airplane lands after a test flight at Boeing Field in Seattle, Washington.

Reuters on Wednesday reported Boeing was on the verge of a deal to sell dozens of 737 MAX 7 jets to Southwest Airlines in potentially its largest 737 MAX order since the jet's safety ban was lifted.

Both deals would provide a much-needed injection of cash for the US. planemaker, which ended last year with more than $60 billion in debt and an historic loss of $12 billion.

The coronavirus pandemic has further complicated the MAX's recovery by decimating demand for air travel and new jets.

Ultra low-cost carriers, or ULCCs, are seen as the winners of the COVID-19 crisis as they offer a no-frills experience at low prices.

They are pervasive in Europe's fragmented market, with Hungarian Wizz Air - a key Airbus customer - competing with the likes of Ireland's Ryanair, a top Boeing user like Southwest.

They have grown more slowly in North America.

In December, Alaska Airlines agreed in December to buy 23 737 MAX 9 jets and Ryanair ordered 75 jets.

At Southwest, Boeing was fending off a challenge from the newer Airbus A220, building on a position as the airline's exclusive supplier as Airbus struggles to reduce production costs for the Canadian-designed A220, industry sources said.

Analysts have described Southwest as a must-win for Boeing and crucial to its broader recovery.

Analysts caution it faces a list of other challenges, from production of its 787 Dreamliner to the delayed development of its 777X and financial overruns on a US. Air Force tanker.

Md Amin Ullah

New top brass for frozen foods exporters' assoc

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Md Amin Ullah, managing director of Ark Sea Foods Ltd in Chattogram, has been elected as president of Bangladesh Frozen Foods Exporters Association (BFFEA) for 2021-22.

The association also elected M Khalilullah, managing director of Satkhira Foods Ltd in Khulna, as its senior vice president.

Ashraf Hossain Masud, managing director at Mashud Fish Processing and Ice Complex Ltd, became vice president for Chattogram and S Humayun Kabir, chairman and managing director of Amam Sea Food Ind Ltd, became vice president for Khulna.

The new directors are: Maqsudur Rahman, A Jabbar Mollah, Ashim Kumar Barua, Md Rezaul Haque, Khondoker Aynul Islam, Md Tariqul Islam Zaheer, Shyamal Das, Dodul Kumar Datta, MA Hassan Panna, Mohammad Ali and Md Arzan Ali, according to a statement.

Govt takes Tk 438cr project

FROM PAGE B1

Razzaque also suggested that BADC officials should play a strong role in producing and distributing seeds. "Our researchers and scientists have already developed many enhanced varieties and technologies for crops. These varieties need to be produced quickly and distributed at the farmer level," he said.

The minister went on to say that Bangladesh has become self-sufficient in terms of food supply.

"We are now working to produce safe and nutritious food." Razzaque also suggested that agricultural officials need to refrain from lobbying for transfers, particularly for the project director and deputy project director posts.

"This is not desirable. I do not like people lobbying," he added.

HSBC to phase out coal funding

AFP, London

HSBC bank on Thursday unveiled plans to phase out financing of the coal industry over the next two decades, bowing to shareholder pressure to do more to tackle global warming. "HSBC today announces it will propose a special resolution on climate change," the lender said in a statement. "The resolution will set out the next phase of HSBC's strategy to support its customers on the transition to net zero carbon emissions. "The plan, which will see HSBC reduce its exposure to fossil fuels, will be put to a vote at its upcoming annual general meeting on May 28.

Activist group ShareAction claimed victory after HSBC's board tabled a resolution that commits the company to phase out financing of coal-fired power and thermal coal mining by 2030 in the EU and OECD, and by 2040 elsewhere.ShareAction and other investors have now withdrawn their separate move. "HSBC's resolution will be the sole resolution on climate change at this year's AGM," the bank added on Thursday. "HSBC is pleased that ShareAction and a number of shareholders who had originally proposed a separate shareholder resolution on climate change, have agreed to withdraw this and support HSBC's resolution, following constructive and positive discussions based on a common goal of helping to build a net zero global economy.

BSEC looking into complaints raised over Padma Bank

FROM PAGE B1

Moreover, the BSEC is going to hold roadshows in Switzerland and Germany in June to bring in more bonds to Bangladesh, he said.

Many major global business districts like Australia, Toronto and the UK have been urging the BSEC to hold such roadshows in those areas also, he said.

The current IT systems of the stock exchanges will be strengthened soon as they are not capable of handling big transactions that are needed in case of bonds, the commission's chairman said.

Regarding the forgery in the audit report by a section of listed companies, he said the BSEC has been working with different regulatory bodies, including the National Board of Revenue and the Financial Reporting Council, for agreeing on accepting unified audit reports only.

Because many companies publish forged audit reports in connivance with a section of unscrupulous audit companies, which give false data on earnings per share, he said.

Currently, the government allows hedge fund for one year but it should be more than one year so that the local companies can purchase commodities at cheaper rates to make a good business with the changes in global prices, he said.

Regarding the role of stock market on generating capital for industrialisation, he said the bourses should be the ground for making long-term financing, not banks.

It will not be viable for any bank in Bangladesh if it finances for a long time like for 10 years, but the banks are financing for 25 years or more, he said. Sharmeen Rinvy, president of the ERF, chaired the discussion moderated by SM Rashidul Islam, general secretary.

Sugarcane farmers suffer massive losses

FROM PAGE B1

Ahmad Mosihur Rahman, general manager (production) of the BSFIC, said all nine remaining mills collectively produced around 44,459 tonnes of sugar as of March 10 by crushing 806,797 tonnes of sugarcane.

Last year, all 15 mills combined crushed 14.07 lakh tonnes of sugarcane.

"The recovery rate fell short this season compared to last year," he said.

Syed Md Abu Bakar, managing director of Joypurhat Sugar Mills, said that the unit had already crushed 84,000 tonnes of sugarcane from three districts to produce 4,270 tonnes of sugar.

The mill's recovery rate is around 5.14 per cent.

Bakar said that 25,671 tonnes of sugarcane were taken from Rangpur while it was 21,541 tonnes for Gaibandha and 37,587 tonnes for Joypurhat.

According to sources, the recovery rate was as good as expected, but it started falling when the supply of dried sugarcane from the catchment areas began to arrive.

The sugarcanes dried in the fields due to late harvests, while there have been delays in transportation.

"It would take at least 10 days to take the sugarcanes to the mills after harvesting, and obviously, the sugarcanes dry up if left under an open sky," Bakar added.

The mill had aimed to produce 10,692 tonnes of sugar by crushing 1.62 lakh tonnes of sugarcanes in the ongoing season.

"So, achieving this target has now become quite impractical," the managing director said.

The final weight of the sugarcanes shrank almost to half as it dried up.

"It is not possible to reach the crushing target with such dried sugarcanes," said another official of the Joypurhat Sugar Mills.

The situation is similar to Thakurgaon Sugar Mills Ltd.

The mill has aimed to crush at least 1.42 lakh tonnes of sugarcane this year. However, only half of the target has been achieved so far, said Md Shakhawat Hossain, managing director of Thakurgaon Sugar Mills.

As of now, the mill has crushed 93,880 tonnes of sugarcane to produce 4,820 tonnes of the finished product this season.

The mill's recovery rate was 5.21 per cent.

Hossain also said that the recovery rate dropped as the sugarcane had dried up. Besides, yields declined due to adverse weather conditions last year.

Such a perilous situation left the growers to face massive losses.

Zikrul Islam of Sundarban village under Dinajpur Sadar upazila cultivated sugarcane on five acres of land last year. Each year, he gets a moderately good yield, but things were different last season.

"My entire sugarcane harvest either got rotten or dried up due to the late harvest," Islam told The Daily Star, adding that he produced just 600 quintals of sugarcane this year.

One tonne equals to 10 quintals.

"I suffered Tk 4 lakh losses as a result," Islam added.

"I have lost everything and become penniless. I have no idea how I will recover from such a situation."

Last year, Islam produced 1,700 quintals of sugarcane on the same land.

The story is similar to many other sugarcane farmers in the district.

Anwar Hossain of Agra village suffered losses of around Tk 1 lakh after cultivating sugarcane on two acres of land.

Hamidur Rahman, general secretary of the Sugarcane Farmers Association in Dinajpur, said that at least 45,000 tonnes of sugarcane were grown in Dinajpur this season.

Of them, the sugar mill authorities procured around 80 per cent as of March 2.

"Not only the farmers but also the sugar mills are suffering losses," he said.

There are around 7,000 sugarcane farmers in Dinajpur, and all of them incurred losses to some extent, Rahman added.

Mehdi Hasan Sagar, general secretary of the Sugarcane Farmers Association in Rangpur, said that sugarcane grown on a total of 7,000 acres of land was pending harvest.

"Fifty per cent of this stock has already dried," said Sagar, who also suffered a Tk 50,000 loss due to the situation.

Many growers left their sugarcane unharvested as they had dried up. In many cases, villagers can be seen taking away these dried sugarcanes to use as fuel, he added.

Following the significant losses incurred this year, many sugarcane farmers said that they would no longer produce sugarcane from next year.

Majharul Haque Prodhan, president of the Bangladesh Sugarcane Farmers Federation, said they had protested the BSFIC decision to close the mills. However, the state-run organisation paid no heed.

"Such a situation would not have arisen if the decision was taken a year back," Prodhan said, urging agriculture researchers to introduce high-yielding varieties in Bangladesh.

According to the BSFIC, all the sugar mills suffered a combined loss of about Tk 970 crore in fiscal 2019-20. The accumulated losses for the last five years stand as Tk 3,976 crore.

Pepe Badsha, general secretary of the Bangladesh Sugarcane Farmers Federation, said corrupt officials of the mills and the absence of high-yielding sugarcane plants were the reasons behind the loss.

"Asides from sugar, many things can be made as byproducts," he said, adding that sugarcane cultivation has declined mainly due to the government's experiment with six mills.

North Bengal Sugar Mills procured 48,000 tonnes of sugarcane from targeted 71,000 tonnes this year.

The mill was shut down on March 1, and the remaining sugarcane was left to rot on the fields, Badsha said.

"So, farmers in the catchment areas suffered losses," he added.

Md Humayun Kabir, managing director of North Bengal Sugar Mills, said they aimed to crush 1.82 lakh tonnes of sugarcane at the mill. However, it managed to crush just 1.28 lakh tonnes as of March 1.

The initial recovery rate was 7 per cent, and it eventually fell to 6.43 per cent.

"Our recovery rate was a bit high as we started the crushing earlier," Kabir said.

According to BSFIC officials, at least 14,07,139 tonnes of sugarcane was grown for crushing in 2019-20. Besides, 64,000 tonnes of sugar remained unsold as of June last year.

The corporation had around 6,000 tonnes of unsold sugar from the previous season.

"Farmers faced losses because of bad production of sugarcanes due to floods. And they got the same price as they received in the past," said BSFIC Chairman Md Arifur Rahman Apu.

Tk 5,883cr digital connectivity project on way

FROM PAGE B1

"The project will make all government offices and institutions across the country digital," NM Zeaul Alam, senior secretary to the ICT Division, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Of the project's total cost, around 65 per cent, or Tk 3,378.5 crore, will come as a loan from the Chinese government while the rest Tk 2,505 crore will be funded from government sources.

"In addition to financing, China will also provide some technical and consultancy assistance," he added.

Besides, a 21-story tower will be built in the capital's Purbachal to house an academy featuring modern ICT labs and facilities to nourish IT entrepreneurs.

The ICT department has already leased a three-bigha plot for the tower, which will create research opportunities for the fourth industrial revolution and human resource development, according to officials.

A digital literacy centre with an ICT lab and other necessary infrastructure, including smart virtual classrooms and distance learning platforms, will also be established under the project.

Besides, 10 digital villages, around 492 non-residential buildings and, for establishing a shared ICT operation centre, the building of 491 upazila complexes will be expanded upward by one story.

Under 10 digital village stations, field surveys will be conducted and 20,000 farmers will be provided with "Sensor Devices".

With 10,000 new Sheikh Russel Digital Labs, the country's secondary and higher secondary school and equivalent institutions will get a boost in transforming their traditional learning system, said Md Rezaul Maksud Jahedi, the project director.

According to Jahedi, there are over 30,000 institutions eligible to house such labs and the ICT division has already installed over 4,000 such labs, covering 23 per cent of the institutions.

There are another 5,000 such labs also being established under a different project.

"If the project gets the final nod, with the new addition, over 70 per cent of such educational institutions will have computer labs. This will speed up the expansion of computer education," he added.

According to the planning commission and ICT division, the project will transform government services into e-services, making them more accessible to the public.

The 100 per cent broadband penetration will increase the accessibility of ICT across the country, ensuring good governance at all levels of the government, and human resource development through the application of new ICT technology, the commission said.

No overnight relief from losses

FROM PAGE B1

According to the BSFIC, the sugar mills faced a loss of Tk 787.10 crore per year on average from 2015-16 to 2019-20 against sugarcane crushing.

However, Carew & Co (Bangladesh) Ltd made Tk 8.85 crore profit per year in the last five years. In the previous fiscal year, the company made a profit of Tk 11.37 crore.

Average production cost reached Tk 131.40 to Tk 319.34 per kg sugar from 2015-16 to 2019-20. The BSFIC sold it at Tk 52.78 to Tk 57.54 per kg. The loss was between Tk 78.86 and Tk 216.18 per kg.

In December, Sanat Kumar Saha, then chairman of the BSFIC, said mill authorities collect sugarcane at Tk 4 per kg, but it was shown as Tk 7 per kg. The BSFIC detected the anomalies, he said.

Saha said the BSFIC has the scope to reduce expenditure and increase revenue by setting up the outlets of Carew & Co (Bangladesh) Ltd at the district level to sell liquor and bio-fertilizer.

The BSFIC earned Tk 120 crore from selling molasses last fiscal year, up from Tk 50 crore each year in the preceding five years.

He said the home ministry was not giving licence for the sales centres and warehouse of Carew & Co.

The mills will have to diversify products and modernise operations to recover from the losses, he said. Mills should manufacture export-oriented liquor and beer, and other products.

Researchers blame mismanagement, corruption and an absence of proper planning for the losses incurred by the state-owned jute and sugar mills.

The rate of sugar extraction from crushing sugarcane is comparatively much lower in Bangladesh. It is six to eight per cent per tonne, down from 12 to 14 per cent in India and Brazil, according to a study by Dhaka University Professor Mohammad Tanjimuddin Khan and Moshahida Sultana and Researcher Maha Mirza.

Md Khorshed Alom, president of BSFIC kendrio Karmachari Union (CBA) ruled out the allegation on involvement with losses of sugar mills as they have no connection with management of the mills.

Capital machinery import yet to get momentum

FROM PAGE B1

"The countries are the major export destination of Bangladesh. This has discouraged exporters from thinking of expanding businesses," said Ibrahim, also a vice-chairman of New Age Group, a manufacturer and exporter of woven and knit apparels.

He went on to express the hope that the import of the items would start rebounding from August to September, but the whole thing depends on how the pandemic is tackled.

The import of industrial raw materials went down 3.37 per cent year-on-year to $9.27 billion in the first half of the fiscal year.

The import of the items had faced a slowdown of 3.27 per cent in the first half of FY20.

"The economy has been facing a slowdown for a long time, and the pandemic has exacerbated the situation," said Ibrahim, also a director of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association.

Kazi Iqbal, a senior research fellow of the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, said businesses now import raw materials just to keep their existing operations up and running.

"The majority of them don't have any future plan to expand due to the ongoing uncertainty. The import trend of capital machinery is a sign of stagnation in the business sector," he said.

Nobody really knows when the situation would come under control. Only containing the pandemic will resolve the business slowdown, he said.

"So, the economy faces huge uncertainties. And the GDP growth will come under pressure," Iqbal said.

The import of intermediate goods, which mainly include clinker, pharmaceutical raw materials, raw cotton, and yarn, stood at $2.50 billion in the first half of FY21, down 16 per cent from a year ago.

The import of the goods had posted a negative growth of 12 per cent in the first half of the last fiscal year.

Emranul Huq, managing director of Dhaka Bank, said imports started an upward trend in January and February, but it may face trouble from the current month.

"We earlier hoped that the wheel of the economy would keep moving at full speed from June. But we are now afraid of the recent spread of infections. The latest pick-up in import will face a roadblock in the months to come," he said.

Syed Mahbubur Rahman, managing director of Mutual Trust Bank, echoed the same.

Uncertainties are growing due to the latest wave of infections, which eroded the confidence of businesses, he said.

The lower imports of capital machinery, industrial raw materials and intermediate goods hit the overall import payments in July to December. Overall imports stood at $25.03 billion, down 9.30 per cent year-on-year.

Prepare to address LDC graduation-linked challenges

Experts say at webinar

Star Business Report

Experts yesterday urged the government to do its homework and prepare for any post-graduation challenges Bangladesh may face when it leaves the list of least-developed countries (LDC) in 2026.

Preparations need to be made from now on in order to overcome the challenges of graduation so that the country does not need to apply for a further extension of its transition period, they said.

Terming LDC graduation a great achievement for the country, they underscored the need to ensure smooth and sustainable graduation.

The experts made these comments while discussing the benefits and challenges of graduation in a webinar styled, "Bangladesh's Transition to Developing Country – Biggest Milestone in Her Development Journey".

The Canadian University of Bangladesh organised the webinar.

The panel of discussants said it would be a shame for the country if it has to appeal for more time to make the transition.

In the last week of February, the UN Committee on Development Policy gave a final recommendation on the country's graduation to a developing nation.

According to the committee's guidelines, Bangladesh was supposed to leave the LDC group in 2024, but the government sought to extend the transition period by two years due to the economic fallouts of Covid-19.

Ahsan H Mansur, executive director of the Policy Research Institute, said the graduation is not any single person's achievement; rather it is an achievement for the entire nation.

Mansur also said the country's per capita income, which was at \$123.50 until 1971, drastically dropped to \$94 in 1972 following the war.

"It was such a great shock to the country and its economy when the central bank did not have a single dollar to operate foreign trade. We had no gold in our fund," he said.

READ MORE ON B2

Apparel exports: resilience and future challenges


Reshad N Ahsan *and* Kazi Iqbal

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in over 114 million infections and a staggering 2.5 million deaths worldwide. It has crippled health systems, deteriorated living standards, and exacerbated inequality.

One area in which the pandemic was expected to have a devastating impact was on international trade. But after a sharp drop in the first half of 2020, global merchandise trade appears to be on track for a steady recovery. The UNCTAD recently revised their forecasted decline in global merchandise exports from 9 per cent to 5.6 per cent for 2020.

A similar pattern is also playing out in Bangladesh, where according to our estimates, total exports were down 33 per cent year-on-year in the first half of 2020 but showed signs of a steady recovery towards the end of the year. We also observe similar patterns in the South Asian countries.

In the case of the apparel industry, this recovery has been driven by three factors. After an initial decline in demand from Western markets early last year, apparel purchases partly recovered in the summer. This allowed Bangladeshi producers to increase export shipments and recoup some of their lost profits.

Second, the brief lockdown in Bangladesh itself helped prevent significant work stoppages. Even during the lockdown, the BGMEA announced a reopening of factories from April 26 in 2020 to complete existing orders.

While the less stringent lockdown carried a public health risk, its impact on disease spread has been relatively minimal.

Our recent work points to a third explanation: the lack of supply chain disruptions. This was due to two main factors: a swift recovery in Chinese exports—the main source of Bangladesh's imported inputs—as well as import diversion away from Covid-impacted source countries.

The nimble management of supply chains ensured that exporters were in a good position to deliver when orders recovered.

Concerns about these disruptions had caused many analysts to argue that the current global supply chains expose firms to excessive risk and are no longer "fit for purpose".

There were sober predictions that supply chains in the post-Covid world would be shorter and less geographically dispersed.

The resilience we document suggests that global supply chains are not as fragile as initially feared and thus a major restructuring is perhaps not likely. This will be a relief to many countries like Bangladesh for whom links to these supply chains have helped in promoting economic development.

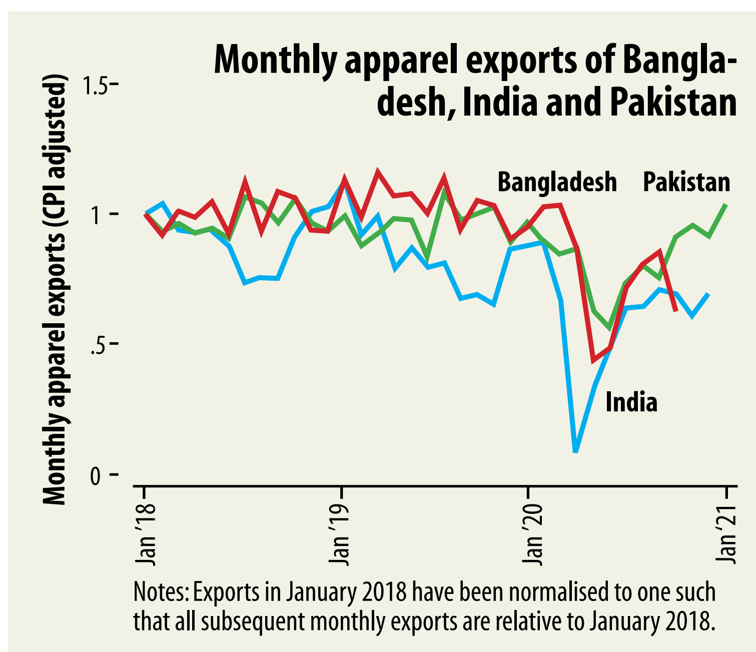
Nonetheless, Covid-19 has highlighted several trade policy challenges for Bangladesh. First, it has again emphasised the dangers of its export concentration in apparel, an industry that has suffered some of the sharpest drops in consumer spending during the pandemic.

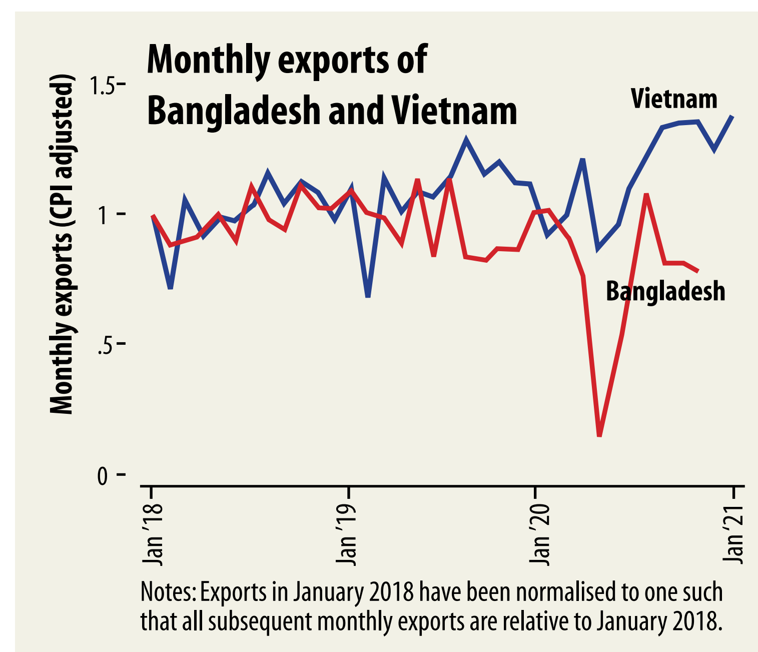
According to the US Census's Monthly Retail Trade Survey, clothing and clothing accessory stores experienced a 51 per cent reduction in sales in March 2020.

This is not surprising given that lockdowns have resulted in people increasingly working from home with little need to splurge on new clothing.

The dependence on apparel also partly explains the much sharper decline in Bangladesh's overall exports compared to that of Vietnam, which is a large apparel exporter but has a much more diversified export basket.

By one measure, Bangladesh's exports are five times as concentrated as that of Vietnam.





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BIDS launches book on Bangladesh's development journey

Star Business Report

Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) has launched a book on Bangladesh's journey towards development since its independence in 1971.

The two-volume book, 'Readings in Bangladesh Development' contains a selection of research carried out over the period of 1972 to 2020 on many critical aspects of development.

The book outlines a development journey that informs, inspires, and hopefully will encourages further explorations in contemporary economic history, according to the BIDS.

KAS Murshid, Minhaj Mahmud and Kazi Iqbal edited the book that was launched on March 10, commemorating the birth centenary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

The volume-1 begins with the post-liberation period and extends up to the year 2000 consisting of a total of 25 articles contributed by the first generation of scholars of the BIDS.

"The selected papers focus on food, agriculture, rural development, manufacturing industry, population studies, migration, and domestic and external resource management," according to the BIDS statement.

The volume-2 continues with the year 2000 and ends in 2020.

"The topics covered are highly relevant to Bangladesh's development transformation," said the autonomous public research organisation.

"Bangladesh's performance over the years was steady and sustained, regularly notching up an additional percentage point to the GDP growth rate in each successive decade since the 1980s."

BIDS said selected papers focus on the micro evidence related to the drivers of Bangladesh's development, including manufacturing performance, investments in infrastructure and ICT, NGOs and microcredit, women empowerment and social outcomes.

They also highlighted the importance of good governance as well as issues such as political instability, urbanisation and climate change related risks for the country.

These commemorative volumes were conceived as a dedication to the memory of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

READ MORE ON B2

GLOBAL BUSINESS

China's Ant Group CEO leaves after failed IPO prompts revamp

Reuters

China's Ant Group Chief Executive Officer Simon Hu has unexpectedly resigned amid a regulatory-driven overhaul of the financial technology giant's business, the first top management exit since a scuppered \$37 billion initial public offering.

Hu, who was named chief executive of the Alibaba Group Holding affiliate in 2019, will be replaced by company veteran and Executive Chairman Eric Jing, Ant said in a statement on Friday.

Hu's exit from the company comes as Ant is working on plans to shift to a financial holding company structure following intense regulatory pressure to subject it to rules and capital requirements similar to those for banks.

That pressure abruptly scuttled Ant's IPO last year, which would have been the world's biggest.

Hu resigned for personal reasons, Ant said in a statement, without elaborating.

"Following the board's thorough discussions, we have decided to respect Simon's personal request and support him fully in his new mission," Jing said in an internal memo, an excerpt of which was seen by Reuters.

Jing will continue in his current role as chairman, he said.

US-listed shares in billionaire Jack Ma's Alibaba dropped as much as 3.9 per cent in the morning trade on Friday. Hu's departure is the first major management change since the IPO was scrapped. He was one of the key executives responsible for managing the company's mega dual-listing in Hong Kong and Shanghai.

Simon Hu, CEO of Ant Group, is seen on a giant screen as he delivers a speech at the INCLUSION Fintech Conference in Shanghai, China. REUTERS/FILE

Billionaire Mackenzie Scott is giving her fortune away and turning philanthropy on its head

ANN/ The Straits Times

In just over a year, author and philanthropist MacKenzie Scott turned the world of charitable giving on its head.

Ms Scott, the ex-wife of Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, whose divorce resulted in her gaining a fortune in Amazon shares that made her one of the richest women on earth, pledged in 2019 to figure out how to give away her billions quickly.

She has since established a unique style of no strings attached philanthropy, giving US\$6 billion (S\$8 billion) last year, much of it to groups serving people hit hardest by the pandemic and working to right systemic inequities. Ms Scott, 50, made headlines again on March 6 when news emerged of her marriage to a Seattle science teacher, Mr Dan Jewett.

On the Giving Pledge website, which encourages billionaires to give away a majority of their wealth to charity, Mr Jewett wrote publicly for the first time about their marriage, and declared that he planned to join Ms Scott in giving away most of their wealth to charity. "In a stroke of happy coincidence, I am married to one of the most generous and kind people I know - and joining her in a commitment to pass on an enormous financial wealth to serve others," he said in his post.

MacKenzie Scott

Ms Scott's style of charity is notable for giving "unsolicited and unexpected gifts given with full trust and no strings attached", as she wrote in her post on Dec 16 last year, when she announced that she had given US\$4 billion to 384 groups in the last four months of the year.

"Not only are non-profits chronically underfunded, they are also chronically diverted from their work by fund-raising, and by burdensome reporting requirements that donors often place on them," she wrote.

Ms Scott said she gave these groups maximum flexibility, paying the entire sum upfront and leaving it unrestricted, so they could spend the funding on whatever they believed best served their efforts.

The groups that Ms Scott and her team chose to help were also departures from the norm, uniquely focused addressing racial inequality and other systemic inequities, and were the sort of organisations that did not typically get the attention and largesse of most big donors.

These included historically black colleges and universities, civil rights advocacy groups and legal defence funds tackling institutional discrimination, as well as organisations working on debt relief and credit and financial services for under-resourced communities, she wrote in her post.

India's draft e-commerce policy calls for equal treatment of sellers

Reuters, *New Delhi*

India will require e-commerce firms to treat sellers equally on their platforms and ensure transparency, according to a draft policy seen by Reuters on Saturday that follows criticism against business practices of big online companies.

India has been deliberating a new e-commerce policy for months amid complaints from brick-and-mortar retailers who allege online giants like Amazon and Walmart's Flipkart flout federal regulations. The companies have denied the allegations.

A Reuters special report last month revealed that Amazon has for years given preferential treatment to a small group of sellers on its India platform and used them to circumvent the country's foreign investment rules.

The latest draft of the policy document says operators should be impartial in their dealings with sellers.

"E-commerce operators must ensure equal treatment of all sellers/vendors registered on their platforms and not adopt algorithms which result in prioritizing select vendors/sellers," it says. A spokesman for the commerce ministry declined to comment.

The policy will apply to Amazon and Flipkart - two top e-commerce players in India - as well as domestic players like Reliance Industries, which has plans to expand its JioMart online platform. All three firms did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Separately, India is also considering changes to foreign investment rules that could prompt players including Amazon to restructure their ties with some major sellers, Reuters reported in January. Government officials are set to hold talks next week with industry executives on such rules, according to people with direct knowledge.

On Saturday, top government officials from various departments, including the commerce ministry, met to discuss the e-commerce policy. The timeline of publication and whether it will be subject to further changes were not immediately clear.

Indian traders have also complained about steep discounts offered by online companies which smaller retailers have not been able to match. Amazon and Flipkart have said they comply with all laws.

Bitcoin hits record \$59,755

Reuters

Bitcoin, the world's biggest cryptocurrency, on Saturday reached a record high, trading up to \$59,755.

Bitcoin is up more than 2 per cent from its previous year high of \$58,354.14 on Feb. 21.

Bitcoin's price soared this year as major firms, such as BNY Mellon, asset manager BlackRock Inc, credit card giant Mastercard Inc, backed cryptocurrencies, while those such as Tesla Inc Square Inc and MicroStrategy Inc invested in bitcoin.

A representation of virtual currency Bitcoin is seen in front of a stock graph in this illustration. REUTERS/FILE