

STOCKS		COMMODITIES		ASIAN MARKETS				CURRENCIES			
Week-on-week		As of Friday		Friday Closings				As on Thursday			
DSEX	CSCX	Gold	Oil	MUMBAI	TOKYO	SINGAPORE	SHANGHAI	USD	EUR	GBP	CNY
▲ 2.35%	▲ 2.23%	\$1,777.18	\$66.11	▼ 0.42%	▼ 0.57%	▲ 0.2%	▲ 0.26%	BUY TK 83.95	99.96	117.01	12.71
5,435.03	9,485.52	(per ounce)	(per barrel)	47,878.45	29,020.63	3,194.04	3,474.17	SELL TK 84.95	103.76	120.81	13.37



Star BUSINESS

DHAKA SUNDAY APRIL 25, 2021, BAISHAKH 12, 1428 BS • starbusiness@thedailystar.net

Branchless banking gaining ground

AKM ZAMIR UDDIN

A good number of banks are going towards branchless banking in recent times by way of rolling out different digital products as a part of their efforts to reach out to more people both in rural and urban areas.

This is also helping them decrease the cost of doing business in an efficient manner as the expenditure of digital banking is much less than the manual one, said managing directors of four banks.

People's habit of branch-led banking has also reduced to a great extent as a large number of clients now prefer to settle transactions sitting from their homes by using internet or mobile app-based banking in order to protect themselves from the coronavirus.

Plenty of local banks have already allowed clients to open accounts without visiting branches during the times of the pandemic to expedite branchless banking to push the clients' habit further.

Syed Mahbubur Rahman, managing director of Mutual Trust Bank (MTB), said the lender had opened only one branch in the last two years.

"We do not have any plan to set up excessive branches in the days ahead except in case of an emergency requirement," he said.

The MTB, which has 118 branches across the country, has decided to expand its financial services in the remotest parts of the country riding on the digital means.

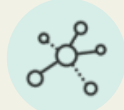
The lender will carry out its banking services by collaborating with fintechs, Rahman said.

"We are going to introduce a new method that will allow clients to give instalments of their deposit pension scheme (DPS) through mobile financial services (MFS) providers," he said.

In addition, the bank is trying to roll out lending services for clients from all walks of life through MFS providers, he said.

The central bank should lay emphasis on the matter as well such that branchless banking gains momentum, he said.

THE CHANGING TRENDS



Total number of branches: **10,685**



Loss-making branches: **1,576**



Pandemic forces banks and clients to do branchless banking



Banks allowing clients to open accounts online



App-based banking gets good response from clients



Export-import transactions can be settled from home



Banks are keen to lend small fund through fintech



People can deposit money with banks through MFS

The model of branchless banking also helps reduce the cost of doing business as well, Rahman said.

Banks have to spend around Tk 1 crore to set up a branch in the major cities including appointing at least 10 officials to run operations.

If they want to set up such an outlet in rural areas, they must count between Tk 50 lakh and Tk

60 lakh.

Despite that, banks have been forced to expand their branches over the years as people in the country are largely habituated to do banking by going to outlets.

Some banks, which had earlier focused on branchless banking in providing financial services, have struggled to make the method attractive for commoners.

Then came the first wave of

the coronavirus pandemic in the country in March last year.

People had been barred from going outside of their homes amidst a lockdown that had also compelled banks to close a good number of branches for the time being, leaving clients with no choice but to use technology to conduct transactions.

The pandemic also created obstacles for banks to set up branches last year. In such a situation, both banks and customers learnt more techniques to do more branchless banking than before.

The country now faces a second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has already given another boost to digital banking.

Although the majority of banks had failed to manage their expected profit for expansion of their businesses by opening new branches last year, they have embraced different digital models to make their services available for people.

Banks set up only 107 branches in 2020 instead of an average figure of 300-400 per year, data from the central bank showed.

Md Arfan Ali, managing director of Bank Asia, said his bank had set up only seven branches in the last two years and it does not have any strong plan to open such outlets in the days ahead.

"But we have a roadmap to open a good number of sub-branches in the days ahead to operate our digital banking activities in rural areas," he said.

READ MORE ON B3

Govt to expand safety net

Aims to build resilience to future shocks, finance minister tells WB



AHM Mustafa Kamal

REJAUUL KARIM BYRON and DWAIWAN BARUA

The government has already provided seasonal assistance to about 10 lakh people living below the poverty line and will expand such social protection programmes to curb the adverse effects of any future economic shock, according to Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal.

A ministry official recently informed that Kamal made these comments in a letter to David Malpass, president of the World Bank Group.

In the letter, Kamal said that the government had taken various measures to strengthen job creation, improve job quality, and promote inclusive access to employment under World Bank funding.

The letter was issued about a month before the multilateral lender's board approved a \$250 million credit support for Bangladesh on March 26.

The Third Programmatic Jobs Development Policy - the last in a series of three loans - aims to facilitate better and more inclusive job creation, enable quick recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, and build resilience to future crisis.

READ MORE ON B3



Carew hand sanitisers remain unsold

Officials blame it on lack of marketing

SUKANTA HALDER

Despite last year's flying start with the production of hand sanitisers, state-owned Carew & Co is now struggling to find customers for 60,000 bottles of disinfectant it has in its store.

The lone state distiller started producing hand sanitiser on March 23 last year and made a profit of Tk 1.2 crore in three months to June.

But sales started falling drastically after that thanks to an increased supply of the cleaning agent from private manufacturers and marketers and reduced demand among people, said Abu Saeed, managing director of Carew & Co (Bangladesh).

At the end of June last year, the company had a stock of 100,000 bottles and in the next nine months to March this year it could sell only 40,000 bottles.

"The lack of marketing and a fall in demand are to blame for the decrease in sales," Saeed said.

Carew has the licence to sell spirits,



which is the main ingredient for producing hand sanitisers.

The company produces sanitisers by mixing distilled water, colour and scent with it.

The state company began producing the hand rubs when its demand skyrocketed within a short time after the first coronavirus-infected patient was detected in Bangladesh on March 8 in 2020.

The company started selling the product through three approved outlets and 13 of its depots.

The demand for sanitisers has increased again with the emergence of the second wave of coronavirus in the country amid a rise in Covid infections.

In the last 24 hours alone, 83 people died of Covid-19, according to data of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS). With this, the total number of Covid deaths reached 10,952 and the death rate stands at 1.48 per cent, the DGHS said.

But still Carew is hardly getting any buyers for its products now.

READ MORE ON B3

Stopping barrage of promotional messages just a dial away

BTRC asks operators to ensure the service

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Mobile phone users can stop receiving promotional messages on their handsets by dialling codes, said the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) in a notice yesterday.

The notice comes amid complaints from users of being bombarded with numerous marketing messages regularly. Because of the receipt of so many messages, many important messages sometimes remain unnoticed, they said.

Mobile phone operators and BTRC officials said the scope to prevent the promotional messages from coming in had been in place for several years.

However, subscribers were unaware of the facility. And neither the BTRC nor telecom operators have made users aware of the scope.

Anyone unwilling to receive marketing SMSs can dial shortcuts and activate the Do Not Disturb (DND) option.

To activate the service, Grameenphone users have to dial *121*1101# and Banglalink users *121*8*6#. For Robi and Airtel, it is *7#, said the telecom regulator.

After the BTRC notice, which was issued to



the media for broadcasting, many mobile phone users started dialling the codes to stop the flow of the promotional messages from various products and service sellers.

Yet, many have not been able to activate the DND option, with a return notification saying, "Sorry, your request failed due to technical reason."

Some got notification such as 'connection problem or invalid MMI code'.

Some were initially successful and got a notification that said the request would be

processed within 72 hours or as soon as possible.

Mahbubur Rahman, a government official, said he received 10-12 messages daily.

"It is annoying," he said. "It should be the choice of the customers whether the person wants to receive such messages or not."

Just after the BTRC notice, Rahman followed the instruction and used the code. He got the message, which said the request would be processed within the next 72 hours.

Contacted, BTRC Vice-Chairman Subrata Roy Maitra said most of the mobile phone users were unaware of the DND as the operators did not campaign about the feature among the subscribers.

"We have asked the operators to inform their subscribers and ensure the service. We have also taken steps to raise awareness among the mobile phone users," he said.

On the issue of the problems faced by subscribers to activate the DND service, he said the BTRC would look into the issue.

SM Farhad, secretary of the Association of Mobile Phone Operators of Bangladesh, said the scope to check the flow of promotional messages by dialling code had been in place. However, people were not that much aware.



A shop on Elephant Road being prepared for opening today as the government allowed markets to remain open from 10:00am to 5:00pm every day while restrictions on movement and others were still kept in place until April 28. The decision was taken to enable some sales for clothes traders ahead of Eid-ul-Fitr amidst the economic slump induced by the pandemic.

AMRAN HOSSAIN

Education should be skill-oriented

Speakers say at a webinar

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Bangladesh's education system should be skill-oriented with an emphasis on technology, innovation, startups and entrepreneurship development, according to speakers at a webinar.

"The country's graduates are struggling to secure jobs as the conventional education system lacks skill-orientation in line with industry demands," said Rizwan Rahman, president of the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce & Industry (DCCI).

"As a result, foreigners dominate the technical and managerial positions in key industries and corporations, leading to a substantial outflow of remittance," he added.

Participants of yesterday's webinar, styled "Industry and Academia Linkage: Role of Academia", agreed that local universities should integrate industry-related content in their undergraduate programmes to prepare students for the job market.

"Industry-academia collaboration in the US, EU and South Korea could provide great examples in this regard," said Prof

"The country's graduates are struggling to secure jobs as the conventional education system lacks skill-orientation in line with industry demands," said Rizwan Rahman, president of Dhaka Chamber of Commerce & Industry

Satya Prasad Majumder, vice chancellor of the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet).

Majumder called upon both public and private sector entities to arrange adequate funding for research and innovation.

READ MORE ON B3

US manufacturing, new homes sales underscore booming economy



Workers weld an upper deck assembly at Look Trailers cargo trailer manufacturing facility in Indiana, US on April 1.

US factory activity powered ahead in early April, though manufacturers increasingly struggled to source raw materials and other inputs as a reopening economy leads to a boom in domestic demand, which could slow momentum in the months ahead.

Retail sales jumped to a record high in March and hiring accelerated, cementing expectations for robust growth in the first quarter and setting up the economy for what could be its best performance in nearly four decades.

Data firm IHS Markit said its flash US manufacturing PMI increased to 60.6 in the first half of this month. That was the highest reading since the series started in May 2007 and followed 59.1 in March.

Economists polled by Reuters had forecast the index rising to 60.5 in early April. A reading above 50 indicates growth in manufacturing, which accounts for 11.9 per cent of

the US economy.

"The US economy is enjoying a strong start to the second quarter, firing on all cylinders as loosening virus restrictions, an impressive vaccine roll-out, a brighter outlook and stimulus measures all helped boost demand," said Chris Williamson, chief business economist at IHS Markit.

More than half of American adults have had at least one vaccine dose, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). A third of US adults are fully vaccinated. That, together with the fiscal stimulus, has allowed for broader economic re-engagement.

But the strong demand is pushing against supply constraints. The pandemic has disrupted labor at factories and their suppliers, causing shortages that are boosting prices of materials and other inputs.

The IHS Markit survey's measure of prices paid by manufacturers jumped to the highest level since July 2008. It attributed the higher

input prices to "severe supplier shortages and marked rises in transportation fees."

The continued rise in input costs is one of many factors expected to drive inflation above the Federal Reserve's 2 per cent inflation target this year. Fed Chair Jerome Powell has expressed confidence that the supply chains will adapt and become more efficient, and prevent prices from remaining higher for a sustained period.

According to IHS Market supply shortages were causing backlogs of uncompleted work "of a magnitude not surpassed for over seven years." The raw material squeeze is most evident in the automobile industry, where a global semiconductor shortage has forced production cuts at motor vehicle assembly plants.

Supply challenges have also spilled over to the housing market, where builders are struggling with record lumber prices, threatening to worsen an already acute shortage of previously owned homes available

for sale.

A report from the Commerce Department on Friday showed new single-family home sales surged 20.7 per cent to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 1.021m units last month, the highest since August 2006.

The sales pace blew past economists' expectations for 886,000 units. The market for new homes is benefiting from the dearth of previously owned home.

"Demand is causing new homes to be bought virtually as soon as they hit the market," said from Robert Frick, corporate economist at Navy Federal Credit Union in Vienna, Virginia.

The data helped to lift stocks on Wall Street. The dollar fell against a basket of currencies. US Treasury prices were lower.

The pandemic is driving demand for bigger and more expensive accommodations as millions of Americans continued to work from home and attend classes remotely. Homebuilders, however, are also grappling with shortages of land and workers.

New home sales are drawn from a sample of houses selected from building permits. Sales soared 66.8 per cent year-on-year in March.

Sales surged in the South, Midwest and Northeast, but fell in the West. They were concentrated in the \$200,000-\$399,999 price range. Sales below the \$200,000 price bracket, the sought-after segment of the market, accounted for only 3 per cent of transactions last month.

The median new house price rose 0.8 per cent from a year earlier to \$330,800 in March. The National Association of Realtors reported on Thursday that sales of previously owned homes declined for a second straight month in March, with prices hitting an all-time high as supply remained near record lows.

There were 307,000 new homes on the market last month, unchanged from February. At March's sales pace it would take 3.6 months to clear the supply, down from 4.4 months in February.

Saudi Arabia to stop fresh food imports from Lebanon over drugs

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia announced Friday the suspension of fruit and vegetable imports from Lebanon, saying shipments were being used for drug smuggling and accusing Beirut of inaction.

The decision is a blow to Lebanon, which is facing its worst economic crisis since the 1975-1990 civil war. The local currency has dived by more than 85 percent on the black market, inflation is rampant and more than half the country now lives in poverty.

Authorities "have noticed increased drug smuggling activity targeting the kingdom from Lebanon... especially in vegetables and fruit consignments", the Saudi interior ministry said.

Riyadh will ban the entry or transit of those products through the kingdom from Sunday, it said in a statement carried by the official SPA news agency.

The restrictions will remain in place until Lebanon provides "sufficient and reliable guarantees" to put an end to what it called "systematic smuggling operations targeting the kingdom".

The move comes after Saudi authorities have made repeated appeals to their Lebanese

counterparts on the matter, SPA said.

The agency also reported Friday that customs officials seized 5.3m pills of captagon hidden in a consignment of "pomegranate" fruit imported from Lebanon at the Red Sea port of Jeddah.

Captagon is an amphetamine manufactured in Lebanon and probably also in Syria and Iraq, mainly for consumption in Saudi Arabia, according to the French Observatory for Drugs and Drug Addiction (OFDT).

Lebanese media quoted the head of the country's fruit and vegetable exporters, Naeem Khalil, as denying it was pomegranate season in Lebanon.

Khalil said the seized cargo could not have been Lebanese but had transited via Lebanon from Syria. Lebanon's foreign ministry said it had been informed by Saudi Arabia of its decision to halt imports of fruit and vegetables, the official National News Agency reported.

Drug smuggling "harms Lebanon's economy, farmers and reputation", the ministry said.

Saudi Arabia has taken a step back from its former ally, angered by the influence of Lebanese Shiite movement Hezbollah, which is backed by Riyadh's rival Tehran.



A Saudi vendor sells fruits in Riyadh.

ER Eastern Refinery Limited
(A Subsidiary of Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation)
North Patenga, Chattogram-4204
Bangladesh

Corrigendum Notice Date: 22/04/2021

The following amendments have been made in the International Tenders Ref. No. ER/PUR/IT-18-22/2021 dated: 14/03/2021:

Sl. No.	Reference number	Title	Amendments
a)	ER/PUR/IT-18/2021	Various Seamless & ERW Pipes	Tender document last selling date & time: 06 May 2021, 14:00 hrs.
b)	ER/PUR/IT-19/2021	Various ERW Pipes	
c)	ER/PUR/IT-20/2021	Cat-ion and An-ion Exchange Resin	Tender closing date & time: 09 May 2021, 11:15 hrs.
d)	ER/PUR/IT-21/2021	White Ceramic Fiber & Rock Wool Wired Insulation Blanket	Tender opening date & time: 09 May 2021, 11:30 hrs.
e)	ER/PUR/IT-22/2021	Differential and Smart Pressure Transmitter	

All other terms and conditions of the tenders will remain unchanged.

"সবাই মিলে গড়বো দেশ, দুর্নীতিমুক্ত বাংলাদেশ" GD-816

Wall Street shrugs off tax talk, Europe sputters

REUTERS

Wall Street rebounded Friday from earlier losses on reports that US President Joe Biden will seek a huge tax hike, but Europe remained on the back foot despite bright economic data.

Wall Street's main indices had ended Thursday down nearly one percent after the first reports broke of the possible hike that would cut into earnings made on selling stocks. But after a mixed start on Friday, major indices pushed higher and finished with solid gains.

The broad-based S&P 500 gained 1.1 per cent. "US markets appear to be recovering some of their equilibrium after yesterday's losses, helped by strong economic data, from March new home sales and solid" PMI surveys of business activity, said Michael Hewson, chief market analyst at CMC Markets UK.

US stocks still finished the week modestly in the red, but Friday's gains cut into the losses. Wall Street pulled back at the beginning of the week despite mostly strong earnings as investors pondered whether stocks have much more upside after a series of records in early 2021. In Europe, stocks mostly fell, despite bright survey data for the region.

London stocks ended the day flat, while Paris dipped 0.2 per cent and Frankfurt shed 0.3 per cent.

"It's been a lackluster end to what has been a negative week for European stocks, with concerns about surging Covid-19 infection rates in Asia weighing on sentiment over the past few days," said Hewson.

GOVERNMENT OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF BANGLADESH
College Education Development Project (CEDP)
College Name: Mohammadpur Mohila College
College Address: 64/2, Noorjahan Road, Mohammadpur, Dhaka-1207

Invitation for Tenders (Retender)

1	Ministry/Division	Ministry of Education
2	Agency	University Grants Commission/ National University
3	Procuring Entity Name	Principal, Mohammadpur Mohila College
4	Procuring Entity Code	N/A
5	Procuring Entity District	Dhaka
6	Invitation for	Renovation of Classroom, Labs, laboratories, Library & Toilets
7	Invitation Ref No	mnc/cedp/w-1/2021/36
8	Date	25/04/2021
KEY INFORMATION		
9	Procurement Method	Open Tendering Method (National)
FUNDING INFORMATION		
10	Budget and Source of Funds	Development Budget (Government & IDA Credit)
11	Development Partners	International Development Association (IDA), World Bank
PARTICULAR INFORMATION		
12	Project Code	224017200
13	Project Name	College Education Development Project (CEDP)
14	Tender Package No.	W-1
15	Tender Package Name	Renovation of Classroom, Labs, Laboratories, Library & Toilets
16	Tender Publication Date	25/04/2021
17	Tender Last Selling Date	06/05/2021 Time: 05:00 P.M
18	Tender Closing Date and Time	08/05/2021 Time 2:00 PM
19	Tender Opening Date and Time	08/05/2021 Time 2:30 PM
20	Name & Address of the office	Mohammadpur Mohila College, Noorjahan Road, Mohammadpur, Dhaka-1207
	Selling Tender Document	
	Receiving Tender Document	
	Opening Tender Document	
21	Place /Date/Time of Pre - Tender Meeting (Optional)	Shall not be held
INFORMATION FOR TENDERER		
22	Eligibility of Tenderer	1. The tenderer shall have a minimum number 03 years general experience in refurbishment activities (construction/renovation/repair/extension) and physical services. 2. The tenderer shall have satisfactory completion of refurbishment activities (construction/renovation/repair/extension) of minimum BDT 25,00,000 (Twenty five lac) only under maximum 01 contract in the last 05 years. 3. The required average annual construction turnover shall be greater than BDT 35,00,000 (Thirty five lac) only over the last 03 years. 4. The minimum amount of liquid assets i.e working capital or credit line(s) of the Tenderer shall be BDT 25,00,000 (Twenty five lac) only. 5. Other Criteria mentioned in the Tender Document.
23	Brief Description of Goods	Floor tiles, Paint and sanitary work etc.
24	Brief Description of Related Services	Related service shall be in accordance with Section 4: Particular Conditions of Contract, Section 6: Bill of Quantities
25	Tender Document Price	BDT 1,500.00 (One Thousand Five Hundred)
26	Tender Package Name	Renovation of Classroom, Labs, laboratories, Library & Toilets
	Identification of Lot	W-1
	Location	Mohammadpur Mohila College
	Tender Security Amount (Tk)	70,000.00 Tk Seventy Thousand Taka Only
	Completion time in Weeks/Months	04 Months
27	Name of Official Inviting Tender	Md. Aminul Haque
28	Designation of Official Inviting Tender	Principal
29	Address of Official Inviting Tender	College Name & Address: Mohammadpur Mohila College, Noorjahan Road, Mohammadpur, Dhaka-1207
30	Contact Details of Official Inviting Tender	Tel: (02)9114442 Fax: E-mail: mncdhaka91@yahoo.com
31	The procuring entity reserves the right to accept or reject all tenders without assigning any reason whatsoever.	

Md. Aminul Haque
Principal
Mohammadpur Mohila College

GD-817

BP Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation
BSC Bhaban, 1st Floor, Saltgola Road
Chattogram

Corrigendum

Invitation for International Re-Tender for Supply of Hot-Rolled Mild Steel Plate

This is to notify for all concerned due to pandemic situation caused by Corona Virus, Bangladesh is going under lockdown. Some corrigenda have been made for following tender notice:

Tender Ref. No.	Sl	Description	Existing	Amended
28.03.0000.041.01.013.19 (HRS-02)	13	Tender last selling date	27-04-2021	19-05-2021
	14	Tender closing date and time	28-04-2021, Time: 1200 Hours (BST)	20-05-2021, Time: 1200 Hours (BST)
	15	Tender opening date and time	28-04-2021, Time: 1215 Hours (BST)	20-05-2021, Time: 1215 Hours (BST)
	16	Offer validity time	26-07-2021, Time: 1700 Hours (BST)	16-08-2021, Time: 1700 Hours (BST)

Dated: 01st April, 2021.

All other terms & conditions will remain unchanged.

Md. Abu Hanif
Sr. General Manager (Com. & Ops.)
Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation

GD-807

Dollar falls as yields languish, euro gets extra late-day lift

REUTERS
The dollar fell against major currencies on Friday as US yields languished and the euro got an extra late-day lift following a earlier boost from an upbeat survey of purchasing managers.

The dollar index fell 0.5 per cent to 90.8080, a level not seen since early March, after the euro climbed 0.7 per cent to \$1.2098, pushing through its earlier high for the week.

More than half of the euro's appreciation came late in the day after the market digested earlier economic news.

"This is thin markets on a Friday afternoon," said Marc Chandler, chief market strategist at Bannockburn Global Forex in New York.

"The euro making new highs for the week late in the day suggests it is going to have momentum into next week."

The exaggerated move came after the markets saw a European purchasing managers' index for April come in better than expected, supporting the view that the region's economic recovery is accelerating and won't keep lagging so far behind the US recovery.

A similar U.S. survey showed factory activity powered ahead in April.

Another report said new home sales in the United States jumped 21 per cent in March.

Both affirmed that the economy was being lifted by government stimulus and increased vaccinations against the coronavirus.

The US survey results were tempered by manufacturers reporting increased struggles to get raw materials and other supplies for production. Yields on 10-year US Treasuries traded in a narrow range through the news and were at 1.56 per cent late in the day, about four basis points lower than at the start of the week.

Until the late-day boost to the euro, Chandler



Rolled euro banknotes are placed on US dollar banknotes in this illustration taken on May 26, 2020.

said Friday's major currency markets were largely "a continuation of what we have seen since the beginning of the month," with the dollar losing much that it had gained earlier in the year as yields climbed to 1.75 per cent on March 31.

"The dollar had a very strong first quarter and the market is still unwinding that," Chandler said.

The dollar in the first quarter gained 3.6 per cent but it has lost about 2.6 per cent so far in April.

Markets now are looking toward next week's meeting of the US Federal Reserve Open Market Committee to review monetary policy and the

economy.

Fed Chair Jerome Powell is expected to echo Thursday's message from European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde that scaled back some expectations for a withdrawal of monetary easing.

Powell's remarks could put more downward pressure on Treasury yields and limit any bounce of the dollar. Auctions of US Treasuries next week are not likely to be big factor, Shaun Osborne, chief currency strategist at Scotiabank told the Reuters Global Markets forum on Friday.

"There still appears to be good demand for Treasury product," Osborne said.

UK retail sales surge before lockdown easing, borrowing leaps, too

REUTERS
British retail sales jumped last month before a partial lifting of coronavirus restrictions, suggesting an economic rebound is under way, but official data also showed record peacetime government borrowing.

Sales volumes leapt by 5.4 per cent in March from February, the Office for National Statistics said, with clothing stores benefiting especially.

Economists polled by Reuters had expected a month-on-month increase of 1.5 per cent.

The ONS said the data reflected "the effect of the easing of coronavirus restrictions on consumer spending".

"March's strong rise in retail sales showed that the economy made a fair bit of progress even before non-essential retailers reopened in April," Paul Dales, an

economist with Capital Economics, said.

Separate data showed Britain's government borrowed 303.1 billion pounds (\$420.1b) in the financial year which ended last month, a surge of 246 billion pounds on the previous year and the biggest share of the economy in peacetime.

Borrowing stood at 14.5 per cent of economic output, the highest such ratio since 1946, after World War Two, when it was 15.2 per cent.

The numbers reflected the surge in public spending and tax cuts to offset the economic hit from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Britain's economy slumped by almost 10 per cent last year, its biggest collapse in more than three centuries, but it is expected to grow by more than 5 per cent in 2021 and 2022, according to the International Monetary Fund.

Amazon and Nestle join public-private plan to save world's forests

REUTERS
The United States, Norway and Britain joined forces with companies including Amazon and Nestle on Thursday to launch a project aimed at protecting the world's tropical forests.

Announcing the Lowering Emissions by Accelerating Forest finance (LEAF) Coalition at the US-convoked Leaders Summit on climate, the public-private project aims to raise at least \$1b in initial financing, it said.

Governments and companies taking part will pay countries with tropical

and subtropical forests for emissions reductions, a move it hopes will help reduce and eventually end deforestation.

As the world looks to move quickly to a low-carbon economy to prevent catastrophic climate change, protecting the forests that help remove carbon from the atmosphere naturally is seen as a crucial step, but one that has so far largely failed.

The pace of deforestation actually picked up in 2020, LEAF said, with data from Global Forest Watch showing a 12 per cent increase from the prior year or more than 10 million hectares of primary tropical forest, roughly the size of Switzerland.

Branchless banking gaining ground

FROM PAGE B1
Sub-branch offers limited-scale banking services where five-six officials are usually appointed.

Bank Asia has already established the agent banking window in a massive manner and it now works on popularising the retail banking operated by the micro-merchant account holder.

The small businesses, like owners of grocery shops, are allowed to open micro-merchant accounts with banks as per the central banking guidelines.

Customers can pay their bills against their purchased products from the shops through scanning quick response (QR) codes by using their smartphones.

In addition, remittance receivers and the beneficiaries of different safety net programmes run by the government will be able to withdraw money from the shops of micro merchant accountholders.

This will lessen the requirements of branches to a great extent, Ali said.

Dutch Bangla Bank has been taking up initiatives to embrace the branchless model since 2005, said its managing director, Abul Kashem MD Shirin.

"We have 210 branches to serve 3 crore clients. We would have been unable to cater banking services had different models of the branchless banking not been introduced," he said.

The bank has already gained huge popularity by rolling out MFS, agent banking, ATM service and so on.

The bank opened 20 branches in the last two years, but it will set up a maximum of 20 branches in the next five years.

A bank, which manages strong CAMELS rating from the central bank, is supposed to

open the highest 12 branches per year.

Banks with lower CAMELS rating are permitted to open a lesser number of branches than the strong ones.

The CAMELS is a recognized international rating system that bank supervisory authorities use in order to rate financial institutions according to six factors represented by its acronym.

The CAMELS acronym stands for "capital adequacy, asset quality, management, earnings, liquidity, and sensitivity".

Dhaka Bank even now allows businesses to open letters of credit sitting from their homes or offices, said Emarul Huq, managing director of the bank.

The bank has recently rolled out a virtual banking product named "Dhaka Bank Trade Cloud", helping clients to do overseas trade smoothly, he said.

This has helped branchless banking flourish further in the country.

As much as 1,576 branches had become loss-making last year, which was 15 per cent of the total 10,685 outlets, the BB data showed. The business slowdown deriving from the pandemic fuelled the rise in the number of loss-making branches, encouraging lenders to adopt branchless banking.

In most cases, the requirement of smartphones turned digital banking essential to be carried out by clients, said Atiur Rahman, a former governor of the central bank.

Poor people are still far away from managing such digital devices, so the government should take measures to this end, he said. The existing tax regime over the import of smartphones can be reduced to make the device available among the marginal people, he said.

Govt to expand safety net

FROM PAGE B1
The WB and the Bangladesh government signed the \$250 million financial agreement on Thursday.

As the ongoing pandemic has highlighted the urgency to enhance resilience to future shocks, the government has built on its Employment Generation Program for the Poorest (EGPP), Kamal said in the letter.

"As such, it adopted an expanded EGPP 'Plus' modality that has adaptable targeting and policies to respond to a range of potential events, including natural, human, health and biological disasters," he added.

Various studies have found that just 50 per cent of the government's targeted demographic receive assistance under its safety net programmes.

The government has also failed to provide any assistance, financial or otherwise, to the indigent hit by the Covid-19 fallout.

Economist Binayak Sen, director-general of the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), told The Daily Star that such social protection programmes should be carried out through coordinated efforts between government and non-government organisations.

In his letter, the finance minister also pointed out certain steps that could be taken in this regard.

"To strengthen our ability to respond to disasters, we have revised and published the Standing Order on Disasters (SOD) in line with the latest global and national frameworks and development plans," he said.

"We expect that this SOD will improve coordination between government and non-government organisations, which is critical for a swift and efficient response to economic shocks."

He mentioned that the coronavirus pandemic

has presented extraordinary challenges for the economy over the past year.

Due to the temporary closure of offices, business, factories and public transport during a nationwide general holiday between March 26 and May 31 last year, the export sector had faced an unprecedented challenge as international orders were either cancelled or put on hold.

This affected around four million workers, mainly female, amid a temporary collapse in demand, Kamal said.

He also mentioned that Bangladesh is showing signs of recovery as mobility has returned to pre-pandemic levels, while exports are on the uptick even though Covid-19 remains a threat.

And with the recent surge in infections across the country, the government imposed strict restrictions on public movement on April 14. However, with Eid-ul-Fitr just around the corner, the government recently announced that all shopping malls would reopen today.

Kamal's letter also mentioned the government's progress on reform programmes to support jobs and the Covid-19 recovery, including modernising the country's trade and investment environment, strengthening systems that protect workers, and improving policies and programmes that enhance access to jobs for vulnerable people.

On the modernisation of trade and investment climate, he claimed that Bangladesh had achieved rapid progress in lowering the cost of starting a business by waiving fees for small firms and enacting the One-Stop Services (OSS) Act to streamline common business registration and operational processes through a single online platform.

He said that the OSS services for 35 key regulatory services are already operational.

The government has also taken steps to amend the Bankruptcy Act to reduce the duration of

legal proceedings and recovery from four years to one or two years while increasing recovery rates.

Legislation in this regard is to be submitted for approval by the cabinet in the coming weeks and the subsequent submission to the Parliament.

The Customs Act (2018) issued new customs rules and directives and established a risk management unit to operationalise modern risk-based customs procedures, speeding up clearance time and freeing up space at ports.

Mentioning that the government is committed to providing support to vulnerable informal sector workers to boost their productivity and help address the impact of Covid-19, Kamal said that adopting a new policy for the Livelihood Restoration Loan microfinance product managed by the Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation (PKSF) could provide low-interest loans to informal microenterprises.

"The government is committed to ensuring that the collection, use and processing of any personal data for these initiatives is done in accordance with good international practice, ensuring legitimate, appropriate, and proportionate treatment of such data," he added.

Kamal also informed about enacting the Child Daycare Act, saying the government is moving forward to establish the institutional foundations for regulations in the day-care sector.

While the government is making a concerted effort to address the impacts of Covid-19 in the near term, it also believes addressing structural challenges are critical to maintaining Bangladesh's development trajectory and delivering a resilient, equitable economic transformation to support the creation of quality jobs.

"As such, we will continue to build on the reforms supported under this programme," he added.

Carew hand sanitisers remain unsold

FROM PAGE B1
"Carew's sanitiser is way effective and cheaper than other products we normally get. But I couldn't find it anywhere nearby after collecting first two bottles from the Suger corporation's Motijheel office," Shahan Shahriar, a regular user of the sanitiser, told The Daily Star.

"I think it can be a profitable venture for a state-owned company. It can serve the people in this pandemic by supplying hand sanitiser at a cheap rate."

But for that the company should make the product available everywhere, he said.

"You can't really ask customers to go to certain places to get Carew's hand sanitisers

when nearly dozen other varieties of them are available in the nearest shops."

"Only those who know about the product are buying our sanitiser," said Mazhar-ul-Haq Khan, chief marketing officer of Bangladesh Sugar & Food Industries Corporation (BSFIC), which runs Carew & Co.

"In fact, we did not even work on how to sell the product after its production. That's why our sales slowed."

Khan said his company had contacted online grocery and food product suppliers to sell the sanitisers. "But none showed that much interest in our product."

"We will emphasise more on marketing with

the start of production of the new batch of hand sanitisers where we will use a new wrapper."

A proposal to launch new wrappers and sell each 100ml new bottle of the sanitiser at Tk 120 got the go-ahead in a recent board meeting of the company, officials said.

Several companies have the same product to attract buyers in the market, said Arifur Rahman Apu, chairman of the BSFIC.

"If the new sanitiser spray bottle is released in the market in a more attractive way, it will become popular among the people."

Carew's managing director said they will sell the unsold products first to avoid any financial loss and then go for new production.

Education should be skill-oriented

FROM PAGE B1
He also underscored the importance of redesigning the curriculum with an emphasis on technology, innovation, business incubation and entrepreneurship development.

M Abul Kashem Mozumder, pro-vice chancellor of the Bangladesh University of Professionals, said students need training facilities to conduct research.

"Universities should mainly focus on teaching, research and entrepreneurship development," he added.

Echoing the same, Dr Carmen Z Lamagna, vice chancellor of the American

International University of Bangladesh, said the government could arrange financial incentives, policy regulations, guidance, support, and infrastructure development to foster industry-academia collaboration.

Prof Imran Rahman, dean at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh, said universities should modernise teaching methods.

"There are three aspects of education -- teaching, research and career placement -- but as a whole, we need to redesign our curriculum in line with the 4th industrial revolution and current market demands," he added.

Yardlong bean farmers over the moon with bumper yields

FROM PAGE B4
Sometimes when the plants are destroyed due to pest attacks, or drought, farmers are left to count losses as they don't get any support from the government.

"The local agriculture officers visit from time to time just to give advice. We have to buy the fertilisers, seeds and pesticides ourselves," he added.

There is usually no or less rain in the country between December and April each year. So, water has to be sourced from nearby ponds to water the land.

If tube-wells and pumps were provided for irrigation, the crisis could be alleviated, farmers said.

"With government subsidies or incentives, we could expand cultivation," Jahangir said.

Feroz Mia cultivated yardlong bean on four bighas of land in Chakergram, while Ashuk Ahmed planted the legume on one bigha of land in Sreepur.

They sold the vegetable at wholesale prices of Tk 20 to Tk 40 per kg.

"I have sold beans worth about Tk 1 lakh so far. I can earn another Tk 20,000 this season if there are no pest attacks," Feroz said.

It costs about Tk 400-500 to apply pesticides every day. Besides, the water crisis discourages people from cultivating yardlong bean.

"It would be better if the government provides incentives," he added.

According to Ahmed, everyone could plant beans if given the opportunity since most lands are left unused after the aman paddy season.

Ashraful Islam Rajib, a union member of Baramchal, said that more than 400 families from about 30 villages of the Brahmanbazar and Baramchal unions were involved in yardlong bean cultivation.

There is a lot of interest in cultivating the vegetable because of its relatively low production cost. But only with the government's help can the farmers expand the acreage, Rajib added.

Hosen Ali and Rajan Ahmed, wholesalers from Sylhet who source legumes from Sreepur Madrasa Bazar, said there was a lot of demand for yardlong bean.

"I buy 30-40 maunds of beans every day to sell in different parts of the country," Ali said.

Md Abdul Momin, agriculture officer of Kulaura upazila, said that they only provided advice to local farmers as there are no official incentive packages for yardlong bean cultivation.

"We encourage the use of eco-friendly and cost-effective pheromone traps to prevent infestations. We also give the necessary advice to prevent yellow mosaic virus infections," he added. The yardlong bean grown in Brahmanbazar and Baramchal are very popular in the Sylhet region, said Lutful Bari, deputy director of the DAE.

"The profitable crop has seen a gradual increase in farming across the division, and growers are pleased with the bumper yields this year."

More needs to be done to ensure workplace safety

FROM PAGE B4
The RCC is a temporary structure under the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments set up to monitor the remediation of National Initiative factories. It will also help institutionalise industrial safety capacities under the Ministry of Labour and Employment and facilitate broader safety initiatives to be built based on good practices in the RMG industry.

It is important to pursue greater collaboration with other ministries, regulatory authorities, employers, workers' associations and academia to establish a safety culture in Bangladesh.

DS: Why did the incident of the Rana Plaza building collapse happen? Who are responsible? Retailers and brands, the government, manufacturers, the ILO, or a lack of unionism

in the sector?
TP: The main reason for the building collapse can be attributed to failure by relevant authorities to enforce national planning and building regulations and the building owner ignoring legal licensing procedures.

Other factors such as the lack of workers' voice exacerbated the situation. However, the legal responsibility for building safety should lie with enforcement authorities during construction (including extensions) and with the building owner once the building is occupied.

With stronger regulation and accountability, workers' voice, and responsible practices by employers and building owners, catastrophes such as the Rana Plaza collapse are preventable.

RANA PLAZA TRAGEDY: EIGHT YEARS ON

More needs to be done to ensure workplace safety

Says ILO Country Director Tuomo Poutiainen

REHAYET ULLAH MIRDHHA

Yesterday was the eighth anniversary of Bangladesh's deadliest industrial disaster, the Rana Plaza building collapse. Many changes have taken place in the garment sector after the disaster that killed 1,138 workers and left more than 2,500 injured. Tuomo Poutiainen shed light on various aspects of the tragedy.

DS: What did Bangladesh learn from the collapse of the Rana Plaza building?

Tuomo Poutiainen (TP): In response to major industrial incidents in Bangladesh's readymade garment (RMG) sector in 2012 and 2013, a National Tripartite Plan of Action on Fire Safety and Structural Integrity was developed in 2013. Bangladesh now knows what needs to be done to address dangerous workplace hazards. The nation and its RMG industry have the know-how to safeguard its workers and citizens from industrial catastrophes and poor working conditions.

DS: Has the safety standard in the garment sector in Bangladesh really improved after the Rana Plaza building collapse?

TP: Bangladesh has come a long way since the 2013 tragedy. The initial aim was to identify factories dangerous to life and close them immediately.

As a result, thousands of factories were inspected on electrical, fire and structural safety; a wide range of safety remediation and improvement measures were taken; the most critically unsafe factories were closed by the government; and tens of thousands of employers and workers were educated and trained on occupational safety and health.

Yet not all factories are up to the agreed standards, and more still needs to be done to mitigate safety and health risks at workplaces. Key



Tuomo Poutiainen

to this is to have national codes that clearly outline requirements and the legal enforcement process for fire and building safety, better collaboration and alignment between government, employers, workers, and entities sourcing from Bangladesh, as well as a national framework on industrial safety that envisages development of expertise needed for world-class standards in Bangladesh, through partnerships between government authorities, private sector and academia.

Within months of the Rana Plaza building collapse, the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 was amended with revisions on occupational health and safety and provisions to give workers a stronger voice through freedom of association and collective bargaining rights. While more is needed, workers can increasingly raise the alarm on health and safety concerns in their places of work. More and more of them need to know that they have basic rights that must be respected and protected. Safety committees are a legal requirement in all establishments with 50 or more workers. Safety committees have an important role to play to ensure decent working conditions

in workplaces.

DS: How much compensation has been paid to how many victims of the Rana Plaza collapse so far? Is the amount that has been paid to the victims grant or compensation? Many union leaders say this is not compensation but a grant.

TP: The Rana Plaza Claims Administration (RPCA) provided \$30 million under its umbrella to around 5,500 claimants. This amount includes direct payment from Primark and financial support from the government. The RPCA was closed in 2015, and its work is now being managed by the Trust for Injured Workers Medical Care (TIWMC), which continues to provide lifelong medical support to those injured in the Rana Plaza building collapse.

The issue of whether the financial benefit provided under the Rana Plaza Claims Administration can be considered as "compensation" was raised in the tripartite plus coordination committee that governed the Rana Plaza Claims Administration. To respect the definition of compensation by the Bangladesh Labour Act, which states that direct employers' payment

to their respective worker can be regarded as compensation, the coordination committee decided to term the financial benefits as "award". At that time, the ILO's focus was to mobilise resource and reach adequate financial benefits to the victims in a transparent manner.

The ILO is now actively working with the government, employers and the workers' organisations on establishing a trial (pilot) of an employment injury scheme, starting in the readymade garment sector. This scheme would gradually include prevention, compensation and rehabilitation of any industrial accident and occupational disease in Bangladesh.

The current Covid-19 crisis has showcased the need to develop comprehensive social protection systems covering both formal and informal sectors. These types of investments require new thinking on how to address shocks to individuals, businesses and the economy as a whole. The ILO is working with the UN system, government, and its social partners on this.

DS: Are the RMG Sustainability Council (RSC) and the Remediation Coordination Cell (RCC) working well to protect the recurrence of the Rana Plaza building collapse in Bangladesh or not?

TP: While a lot has been done, the government needs to increasingly extend industrial safety work to all industries to ensure safe factories and establishments. The role of the government is essential in monitoring the industry and ensuring compliance with national codes and standards. In this regard, the garment industry is leading the way with the establishment of the RSC, which builds on the legacy of the private sector initiatives for remediation of RMG factories, and can serve as an example for other industries.

READ MORE ON B3

Yardlong bean farmers over the moon with bumper yields

DISTRICTS IN FOCUS

MINTU DESHWARA

Farmers that cultivated yardlong bean in fallow lands in two unions of Kulaura upazila in Sylhet's Moulvibazar district are enjoying tremendous success thanks to bumper yields and a reasonable market price.

They now hope to expand cultivation with support from the government.

Favourable weather conditions and the availability of relatively cheap fertilisers led to a huge harvest this season, according to farmers.

Yardlong bean, also known as asparagus bean, was farmed on 50 hectares of land in Brahmanbazar and Baramchal unions of Kulaura this year, up from 40 hectares in 2020, data from the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) shows.

The region produces three varieties of legume. It is considered a good yield when one bigha of land produces 10 to 12 maunds of yardlong bean two months after planting.

Amid the ongoing harvesting period, many local women are engaged in collecting the vegetable. They are paid a portion of the harvest as wages.

"I can collect 14 to 16 kilograms of

yardlong bean daily and get one-sixth of it as wages," said Husna Begum, who was collecting the vegetable from a field in the upazila's Chokergram village on Friday.

Similarly, Aklima Begum, Helena Begum, Ambia Khatun, Kohinoor Begum, and Jahanara Begum are all engaged in the seasonal profession to add to their family income.

Wholesalers from all over the country come to Sreepur Madrasa Bazar on Kulaura's Brahmanbazar-Baramchal road to buy the bean from local farmers.

As such, the bazar bustles with activity from 6:00 am to 9:00 am almost every day as traders come to buy the vegetable.

During a recent visit to the area, this correspondent spoke to Md Harun Mia and Jahangir Mia, residents of Singur village, who had come to sell their yardlong beans at the market.

"Since my one and a half bigha of land would be otherwise left unused after harvesting aman paddy, I cultivate yardlong bean in December-January," Harun said.

He sells 700 kgs of yardlong bean at the wholesale market every day.

"So far, I have made around Tk 21,000 from the crop this year. I will be able to sell the vegetable worth another Tk 50,000 in one month," he added.

Jahangir said he had been cultivating the bean for 15 years now.

READ MORE ON B3



Favourable weather conditions and availability of cheap fertilisers led to a huge harvest this season, according to farmers.

PHOTO: MINTU DESHWARA

Bitcoin tumbles below \$50,000, other cryptos sink over Biden tax plans

REUTERS

Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies posted sharp losses on Friday, on concern that US President Joe Biden's plan to raise capital gains taxes will curb investments in digital assets.

News reports on Thursday said the Biden administration is planning a raft of proposed changes to the US tax code, including a plan to nearly double taxes on capital gains to 39.6 per cent for people earning more than \$1 m.

Bitcoin, the biggest and most popular cryptocurrency, slumped to \$47,555, falling below the \$50,000 mark for the first time

year, however, it was still up 72 per cent.

But while social media lit up with posts about the plan hurting cryptocurrencies, and individual investors complaining about losses, some traders and analysts said declines are likely to be temporary.

"I don't think Biden's taxes plans will have a big impact on bitcoin," said Ruud Feltkamp, CEO of automated crypto trading bot Cryptohopper. "Bitcoin has only gone up for a long time, it is only natural to see consolidation. Traders are simply cashing in on winnings."

Others also remained bullish on bitcoin's long-term prospects but noted it might take



REUTERS

Smaller rivals Ether and XRP fell 3.5 per cent and 6.7 per cent respectively.

since early March. It was last down 4 per cent at \$49,667.

Smaller rivals Ether and XRP fell 3.5 per cent and 6.7 per cent, respectively, while dogecoin, created as a joke for early crypto adopters and which had surged about 8,000 per cent this year prior to this latest setback, was down 20 per cent at \$0.21, according to price and data tracker CoinGecko.

The tax plans jolted markets, prompting investors to book profits in stocks and other risk assets, which have rallied massively on hopes of a solid economic recovery.

"With a high growth rate in the bitcoin price, crypto holders that have accrued gains will be subjected to this tax increment," said Nick Spanos, founder at Bitcoin Center NYC. He sees bitcoin dropping further in the coming days. Bitcoin is on track for an 11.3 per cent loss on the week, it is the worst weekly showing since late February. In the

time before prices start increasing again.

"Investors will see the price drop across the crypto market as an opportunity to widen their portfolio by averaging up their investment outlay and buying new altcoins," said Don Guo, chief executive officer at Broctagon Fintech Group.

He added that for bitcoin, investors will see it as an opportunity to buy bitcoin at a lower price.

Shares of cryptocurrency exchange Coinbase were up 0.5 per cent at \$294.86 in the early afternoon US trading. The public floatation of its shares on April 14 had seen bitcoin prices rise to \$65,000, before pulling back 25 per cent in the following days.

"The Coinbase listing - the ultimate poacher-turned-gamekeeper moment - might have been the high watermark for bitcoin," said Neil Wilson, chief market analyst at Markets.com.

GLOBAL BUSINESS

Germany set to upgrade 2021 growth forecast: minister

AFP, Berlin

The German government is set to upgrade its growth forecast for this year as industry holds up well to the economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic, Economy Minister Peter Altmaier said Saturday.

"In January, we forecast growth of 3.0 per cent. Current data show that it will even be slightly higher," Altmaier said in an interview with the Funke media group. Europe's biggest economy shrank by 4.9 per cent in 2020 as restrictions to curb the pandemic hit many sectors.

The economy ministry is scheduled to unveil its updated gross domestic product forecasts on Tuesday.

"There are reasons to be



REUTERS/FILE

German Economy Minister Peter Altmaier in Berlin, Germany.

optimistic," Altmaier said, pointing to better-than-expected data as industry benefits from the global recovery. Nevertheless, he acknowledged that the anti-Covid restrictions - which are being tightened in Germany from this weekend in an attempt to rein in a ferocious third wave of infections - have hit sectors such as retail, gastronomy and hotels particularly hard.

The German economy will return to pre-pandemic levels "by 2022 at the latest," Altmaier said.

Last week, Germany's leading think-tanks similarly warned that the current wave of the pandemic would put the brakes on economic recovery, but they were pencilling in growth of as much as 3.7 per cent this year.

Oil edges higher as recovery support countered by Asia virus surge

REUTERS

Oil settled higher on Friday, supported by bullish economic data from US and Europe, though a rise in coronavirus cases in India was still pressuring prices.

Brent crude settled up 77 cents, 1.1 per cent, to US\$66.11 a barrel. US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) US crude gained 71 cents, or 1.2 per cent, to US\$62.14 a barrel.

For the week, both benchmark crudes fell about 1 per cent due to the resurgence of infections in India and Japan, the world's third and fourth largest oil importers.

"This price consolidation follows a strong four-month price advance that was largely predicated on US vaccine progress that forced some upward revisions in global demand ideas across this year," said Jim Ritterbusch, president of Ritterbusch and Associates in Galena, Illinois.

Euro zone Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) data for April showed

a stronger-than-expected recovery and more European states began easing coronavirus lockdowns. France said schools would reopen on Monday.

US data added to the upbeat outlook; the number of

Americans filing new claims for unemployment benefits fell to a 13-month low last week. "The PMIs across Europe were really off the charts, especially following the strong unemployment report in the US," said John Kilduff, partner at

Again Capital LLC in New York.

US refiner Valero said demand for gasoline and diesel was at 93 per cent and 100 per cent of pre-pandemic levels.

International oil activity should ramp up through the end of this year and beyond, Schlumberger NV top boss Olivier Le Peuch said.

US energy firms cut the number of oil rigs operating for the first time since March, as rigs fell by one to 438 this week, according to energy services firm Baker Hughes Co.

Before this week, drillers added rigs for five weeks in a row and has been up 80 per cent since falling to a record low of 244 in August 2020.

Oil demand concerns weighed as India's coronavirus cases surged to record highs.

Several countries, including Australia, Britain, Canada, and the United Arab Emirates have barred or cut flights from India.

Japan declared new lockdowns in Tokyo, Osaka and two other prefectures on Friday.



REUTERS/FILE

A general view of the Amuay refinery complex which belongs to the Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA in Punto Fijo, Venezuela.