

World food prices ease further in Nov: FAO

REUTERS, Paris

The United Nations food agency's world price index fell marginally in November, marking an eighth straight monthly fall since a record high in March after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) price index, which tracks the most globally traded food commodities, averaged 135.7 points last month, down from 135.9 for October, the agency said yesterday.

The October figure was unchanged from the FAO's previous estimate.

Lower readings for cereals, meat and dairy products in November offset higher prices for vegetable oils and sugar, the FAO said.

Last month's agreement to prolong a UN-backed grain export channel from Ukraine for another 120 days has tempered worries about war disruption to massive Black Sea trade.

The slight decrease in November meant that the FAO food index is now only 0.3% above its level a year earlier, the agency said.

The indicator, however, remains at historically high levels after reaching a 10-year peak in 2021 owing to harvest setbacks and brisk demand led by China.

The FAO warned last month that expected record food import costs in 2022 would lead the poorest countries to cut back on shipped volumes.

In separate cereal supply and demand estimates, the FAO lowered its forecast for global cereal production in 2022 to 2.756 billion tonnes from the 2.764 billion estimated last month.

The forecast was 2 percent below the estimated output for 2021 and would mark a three-year low, the FAO said.

The downward revision to the global cereal crop projection mainly reflected weak maize (corn) prospects in Ukraine, with the war making post-harvest operations prohibitively expensive, it said.

Projected world cereal stocks by the end of the 2022/23 season were revised down by 1.1 million tonnes to 839 million tonnes, 2.2 percent below the previous season and the lowest level for three years.

The 2022/23 global cereal stock-to-use ratio, often used as a supply indicator, would drop to its lowest since 2013/14, but at a forecast 29.3 percent it would still represent a relatively comfortable level, the FAO added.

West must accept Moscow's demands

Says Putin as he lays conditions for talks to end Ukraine war; EU tentatively agrees \$60 price cap on Russian seaborne oil

AGENCIES

Russian President Vladimir Putin is "open to negotiations" on Ukraine but the West must accept Moscow's demands, the Kremlin said yesterday, a day after US President Joe Biden said he was willing to talk if Putin were looking for a way to end the war.

Speaking after talks on Thursday at the White House with French President Emmanuel Macron, Biden said he was ready to speak with Putin "if in fact there is an interest in him deciding he's looking for a way to end the war", adding the Russian leader "hasn't done that yet".

Biden has not spoken directly with Putin since Russia invaded Ukraine on Feb. 24. In March, Biden branded Putin a "butcher" who "cannot stay in power".

Now, after more than nine months of fighting and with winter tightening its

grip, Western countries are trying to boost aid for Ukraine as it reels from Russian missile and drone attacks targeting key energy infrastructure that have left millions without heating, electricity and water.

Fighting is raging in eastern Ukraine, with the town of Bakhmut the main target of Moscow's artillery attacks, while Russian forces in the southern Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions remain on the defensive, Ukraine's General Staff said in its latest battlefield update.

In a bid to reduce the money available for Moscow's war effort, the European Union has tentatively agreed to a \$60 a barrel price cap on Russian seaborne oil, diplomats said. The measure will need to be approved by all EU governments in a written procedure by Friday.

In Moscow's first public response to Biden's overture, Kremlin spokesman

Dmitry Peskov told reporters: "The president of the Russian Federation has always been, is and remains open to negotiations in order to ensure our interests."

However, Peskov said the US refusal to recognise annexed territory in Ukraine as Russian was hindering a search for ways to end the war. Moscow has previously sought sweeping security guarantees including a reversal of Nato's eastern expansion.

"What did President Biden say in fact? He said that negotiations are possible only after Putin leaves Ukraine," Peskov told reporters, adding Moscow was "certainly" not ready to accept those conditions.

Putin told German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in a phone call yesterday that the Western line on Ukraine was "destructive" and urged Berlin to rethink its approach, the Kremlin said.



BNP leaders and activists from different districts in Rajshahi division flock in droves to Rajshahi city's central Eidgah ground area yesterday afternoon ahead of the party's divisional rally today. Many opposition men faced difficulties in reaching the city as an indefinite transport strike came into force in the division's eight districts on Thursday morning.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

2 men to die for raping minor

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Moulvibazar

A Habiganj court has awarded two men with death penalty for raping a minor in the district's Madhabpur upazila in 2019.

Judge SM Nasim Reza, of Women and Children Repression Prevention Tribunal-3, handed down the verdict Thursday afternoon.

The condemned convicts are Shahid Mia, 45, and Mostafa Mia, 35, both residents of Madhabpur upazila.

The court also fined them Tk 1 lakh each. The verdict was announced in presence of the accused, said Public Prosecutor Sirajul Haque Chowdhury.

2 suffer burns as car catches fire

STAR REPORT

Two persons suffered burn injuries as a car caught fire in the capital's Asad Gate area Thursday night.

The injured are Rubel Dutta, 45, a merchandiser and owner of the car, and Uzzal Kumar, 35, driver of the car.

The car caught fire around 10:30pm when Rubel was returning to his Green Road house from Uttara, said his brother-in-law Nayan Biswas.

Locals took the injured to Sheikh Hasina National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery, he added.

Rubel and Uzzal suffered 60 and 40 percent burns respectively, Nayan said, quoting doctors at the hospital.

31 arrested in N'ganj in cases under explosives act

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Narayanganj

Narayanganj police have arrested 31 persons, including leaders and activists of the BNP, in cases filed under the explosives act with seven police stations in the district.

They were arrested between Thursday night and yesterday, said police.

Muhammad Giasuddin, convener of Narayanganj district unit BNP, said the law enforcers were arresting their activists to thwart the BNP's pre-scheduled rally on December 10 in the capital.

Ten cases have so far been filed since November 17. Of them, seven were lodged by police, two by activists of Chhatra League, and one by Sramik League.

Shocking, inhuman

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Amin said he was riding the motorcycle with Rubina riding pillion when the car hit the bike around 3:00pm.

"Our house is in the Hazaribagh area. We were heading home from Tejgaon through the Dhaka University campus. A car hit my motorcycle between Shahbagh and TSC. We both fell to the ground, but my sister-in-law got stuck under the car that hit us. The car then dragged her all the way from there to Nilkhet and did not stop even though people were shouting and yelling," he told reporters at the DMCH.

Witnesses said after people forced the driver to step out of the car after stopping him and assaulted him.

A video clip recorded from a motorcycle showed people shouting and yelling at the driver to stop the car which kept dragging the woman towards Nilkhet.

Dhaka University Vice-Chancellor Professor Md Akhtaruzzaman told The Daily Star, "It is a very shocking, inhuman and cruel incident."

"The man who was behind the wheel is a former teacher of Dhaka University. I took action against him after becoming the vice-chancellor. We are concerned about the campus security."

SIT-IN IN FRONT OF VC RESIDENCE

Students and leaders of some DU organisations demonstrated after the incident demanding greater safety on the campus.

In the evening, some of the university's representatives of hall caucuses, and members of Chhatra Union and Chhatra Adhikar Parishad protested with torches and staged a sit-in in front of the VC's residence.

The Chhatra Adhikar Parishad demonstrated in front of the Raju Memorial Sculpture around 7:30pm and marched to the VC's residence.

The sit-in ended around 11:30pm, roughly three hours after it started.

They made three demands: roads through the campus should be brought under university authority; speed limits should be imposed on vehicles on the campus; and checkpoints should be set up at every entrance to the campus.

Akhtar Hossain, president of Chhatra Adhikar Parishad, said drivers do not follow road safety rules while driving on the campus.

"There is no one to check these rowdy vehicles," he said.

All behind schedule

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the progress reports of the projects for last six years and talking to around a dozen of BR officials.

Of the 35 ongoing projects, 18 are for constructing or expanding or rehabilitating rail tracks, bridges and the signalling system.

Once completed, six new districts will come under rail network and the existing tracks and services in important and busy business districts will be upgraded. Even connections with neighbouring India would also improve.

Six other projects have been undertaken to procure locomotives, carriages and wagons, as around 67 percent of locomotives and 47 percent of carriages have crossed economic life, which is ultimately hampering BR services seriously.

The remaining 11 projects are for carrying out feasibility studies and securing technical assistance for new or ongoing projects.

Eighteen of the projects are either being or supposed to be implemented with loans, mostly from Asian Development Bank, China, Japan and India.

Time extension and cost escalation are nothing new for BR projects.

A report of the Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED) on 13 projects, completed in fiscal 2016-17, shows that all of them required time extension and costs went up in four projects.

Delay in material supply from abroad, frequent changes in project designs, changes in work scope, complications over appointing consultants and frequent changes of project directors are the key reasons for the delay and rise in costs, according to the report published in June this year.

Between 2008-09 and 2022-23 fiscal year, the government allocated Tk 107,645 crore to BR under the annual development programme (ADP).

But BR could spend Tk 71,113 crore — only 66.06 percent of total allocation — till October this year, show BR documents.

25 PROJECTS

Twenty-five projects have been progressing beyond their deadlines. At least four of them were taken up over a decade ago.

One of the projects was taken in 2010 to lay a metre gauge rail track to link Chattogram with Cox's Bazar at a cost of Tk 1,852.35 crore. The project was supposed to be finished within June 2013.

But a decision was made in 2014 to go for a dual-gauge track for better connectivity, raising the cost tenfold to Tk 18,034.47 crore (873.76 percent rise).

But the construction of rail track from Dohazari of Chattogram to Ramu in Cox's Bazar started in March 2018.

The last deadline of the project is June 2024, with one year defect liability period. It witnessed 76 percent progress

till September this year.

Railways Minister Nurul Islam Sujon recently directed contractors to complete the work "anyhow" by June next year, sources said.

BR undertook a project in November 2012 to construct third and fourth dual-gauge railway lines on the Dhaka-Tongi route and a second dual-gauge line on the Tongi-Joydebpur route.

The 848.60 crore project, taken without any feasibility study, was supposed to be finished by June 2015.

Its current deadline is June 2023 and the revised cost is Tk 1,106.80 crore. And recently, the project authorities sought time until June 2027 and Tk 2,158.96 crore more to complete the project.

10 OTHER PROJECTS

The remaining 10 projects are also running behind schedule, show documents.

One of the projects was taken in November 2018 to turn the 174km Joydebpur-Ishwardi part into dual-gauge double lines. The deadline for the Tk 14,250.61-crore project is December 2024.

But implementation of the project became uncertain after China pulled out of the project last year, citing a "lack of in-depth preliminary work and insufficient feasibility study".

Currently, Japan is reviewing the study to decide whether to fund the project. Even if Japan agrees to finance the project, its construction work may not begin before 2025, said officials.

In 2018, BR took up two projects involving Tk 5,187 crore to boost internal and inter-country rail communications. The projects would be executed with an Indian line of credit.

The two projects — conversion of metre-gauge lines to dual-gauge ones from Parbatipur to Kaunia and the construction of a double-line from Khulna to Darshana — were supposed to be done by December this year.

But BR could only appoint consultants for the two projects in August this year, just four months before the expiry of the project deadlines.

Now BR would need about five years to finish the projects, officials said.

Like the three projects, the construction of seven others is yet to start.

WHAT BR OFFICIALS SAY

A BR official blamed delay in land acquisition, relocation of utility services and tendering process and revision of projects; absence or poor feasibility studies and a lack of skilled manpower for poor implementation of projects.

Another official said in many cases, projects on constructing rail tracks have to be implemented on the existing lines along the lines. In such case, carrying out work without disrupting rail operation often delays the projects.

An official said sometimes contractors and consultants, having good links with high-ups, force the authorities to change decisions for their

own interest, ultimately causing delay in project completion and escalating costs.

BR did not get major funding for decades, so the rail sector needs an overhauling, which naturally takes time and money, said another official.

Contacted, BR Director General Dharendra Nath Mazumder said each project is different, so the reasons are different for delays in implementation.

Citing Chattogram Cox's Bazar Rail Link Project, he said one of the two contractors of the project is facing financial crisis, while the other could not continue the work smoothly due to land-related issues.

"We face many issues while implementing projects at sites, which often leads to a delay," he told The Daily Star on November 11.

Asked about the BR capability, he admitted that there was a shortage of necessary manpower. "We are regularly holding meetings to solve problems and speed up project implementation."

He, however, denied the allegation that the authorities change decisions under pressure from contractors and consultants.

BNP ready

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strike in the division, were staying in the marquees since Wednesday night.

Fifty-year-old Hamid Ali of Sirajganj's Belkuchi upazila said he reached the city on Wednesday night along with 300 party men by a bus. After staying in the open that night, he said, they set up tents as the temperature dropped at night.

He claimed that police damaged their tents and they had to set up those again.

Due to the transport strike, the common people in the division also suffered immensely.

Abdul Baten, who started his journey from Shibganj of Chapainawabganj early yesterday, said, "We started for Rajshahi by a van. When the police stopped us on the way, we started walking. Finally, we reached Rajshahi around noon on three-wheelers."

Abdul Alim, an official of postal services, said, "My uncle died. I need to go to Mohonpur upazila to see him for the last time. But I couldn't as there was no bus available."

Meanwhile, Rajshahi-bound vehicles were being searched at eight police checkpoints. Besides, there is a Rab checkpoint in Natore.

In the Rajshahi city, 17 checkpoints were set up for security purposes.

The opposition party men alleged that they faced obstructions by police at different points on their way to Rajshahi city.

Musk kicks Kanye West off Twitter after swastika post

AFP, Los Angeles

Elon Musk yesterday kicked Kanye West off Twitter "for incitement to violence," after the rapper posted a picture that appeared to show a swastika interlaced with a Star of David.

The post came hours after an interview with conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, in which West sparked outrage by declaring his "love" of Nazis and admiration for Adolf Hitler.

West had also shared a picture

Rejoinder, our reply

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several cheques. Tk. 194.7 Crore is not missing. Asiatic Oil Co. Ltd is a franchisee of SAOCL since 1994 to market & sell all petroleum products of SAOCL. The matter has been discussed in the board meeting of SAOCL and accordingly two independent audit firms has carried out reconciliation audit which is still in the draft stage. Needless to mention it is a common business norm to have dues between buyer and seller."

Ahmed also denies never returning the Tk 86.7 crore he withdrew from SAOCL's bank accounts for company purposes from fiscal 2011-12 to 2013-14 without furnishing any vouchers or invoices for the advances or the Tk 23.11 crore from fiscal 2012-13 to 2015-16 in advances thanks to having no withdrawal ceiling.

"From 2011-12 to 2013-14 to 2015-16 all accounts have been approved by the Board of Directors of SAOCL and Annual General Meeting till 2017-18 have been completed. No advance reflected in the books of accounts against Mr. Moinuddin Ahmed during those years," the rejoinder said.

"After perusing the whole report, it is evident that the whole report of 04.11.2022 was published by The Daily Star was based on an audit/compliance report prepared by CAG. It is pertinent to mention here that so-called audit report which was referred by the Daily Star in the report is a draft audit report which is not still finalized by CAG. CAG already sent a copy of the said draft audit report to SAOCL for detail clarification and SAOCL already provided a proper clarification regarding the said allegations which are agitated in the said draft audit report of CAG against me and SAOCL."

In Company Matter No. 325 of 2018, which was filed by Asiatic Industries Limited being a 50 percent shareholder of SAOCL, a single bench of the High Court Division in an order

of a shirtless Musk getting sprayed with water, captioned: "Let's always remember this as my final tweet."

In response, Musk said: "Just clarifying that his account is being suspended for incitement to violence, not an unflattering pic of me."

Musk, who previously called himself a "free speech absolutist," has repeatedly said he believes all content permitted by law should be allowed on Twitter, and sought to remake the social media organization after he took control in October.

on March 7 directed an independent audit firm namely 'Rahman Rahman Haq' to carry out a special audit of SAOCL from 1975 to 2022 to assess the real financial position of the SAOCL, the rejoinder said.

"The said audit process is still going on. The outcome of the said audit process will show the clear picture of SAOCL."

SAOCL also filed a writ petition — Petition No. 11770 of 2019 — challenging a memo dated October 17, 2019 issued by BPC "as it relates to dictating to impose the decisions of BPC upon SAOCL."

The said writ petition is pending for hearing before the High Court.

Ahmed also denies buying eight flats worth Tk 22.68 crore in his wife's name in Dhaka and Chattogram with the embezzled money from SAOCL, as uncovered by the Anti-Corruption Commission.

"[...] which is absolutely untrue, imaginary and posted with malafide intention. The actual fact is, I did not bought 10(ten) flats in my wife's name in different parts of Dhaka and Chittagong and ACC is still in investigating stage."

The rejoinder further added: "The report is also a vague one without stating the whole picture as in the whole report I have been made a scapegoat to misguide the ongoing investigation of ACC and the ongoing audit process of SAOCL."

OUR REPLY

Our report is based on a published audit of the Comptroller and Auditor General, which was presented at the parliament in June. ACC has also completed an investigation of its own and found the irregularities.

The CAG report mentions SAOCL as a subsidiary of BPC. The company's website as well as the CAG report state that it has five directors.

Despite repeated attempts, Ahmed could not be reached for comment.

As such, we stand by our report.