



According to a survey, around 52.2 per cent of Bangladesh's population have smartphones. Only 29.7 per cent of rural households use the internet while the number is 63 per cent for urban households. The photo was taken from Chattogram city recently. PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

Most households shy away from internet for high costs: survey

MD ASADUZ ZAMAN

A staggering three-fourths of households in Bangladesh think they do not need access to the internet as the required data and devices are still too expensive for them, according to a survey by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS).

About 63.1 per cent of households do not feel the need to use the internet and 48.2 per cent think internet services are too expensive, shows a preliminary report on the "Survey on ICT Use and Access by Individuals and Households 2022".

A total of 97.4 per cent of households in the country have mobile phones, but some 34.9 per cent of those surveyed said the equipment required to access the internet is still too expensive.

The survey, published yesterday, also highlighted the non-affordability of connecting devices and elusive digital inclusion for many, especially those who reside in rural areas.

Only 29.7 per cent of rural households use the internet while the number is 63 per cent for urban households.

A total of 38.1 per cent of households

use the internet, found the survey, depicting a grim scenario when it comes to digital inclusion and contradicting the claims of government officials, who often paint a rosy picture of the country's digital advancement and connectivity.

Government officials often say there are more than 13 crore internet users in Bangladesh.

This survey largely supports the findings of a preliminary report on the Population and Housing Census 2022 published in July, which found 6.5 crore people, aged 18 or above, do not use the internet.

Around 52.2 per cent of Bangladesh's population have smartphones. Division-wise, the percentage of internet using households is highest in Dhaka at 54.2 per cent and lowest in Rajshahi at 19.7 per cent, found the latest survey.

In terms of access to mobile phones, the female population beat the male population by 0.1 percentage points with the latter registering 89.9 per cent.

The survey also found that the number of computer users is highest in Chattogram at 15 per cent and lowest in Barishal at 4 per cent.

It said the percentage of internet users in the total population rose from 6.7 per cent in 2013 to 38.9 per cent in 2022.

The rate of mobile usage also increased from 81.7 per cent in 2013 to 89.9 per cent to 2022.

"This survey indicates that the government and private initiatives to popularise internet use among the population have largely failed," said AKM Fahim Mashroor, chief executive officer of Bdjobs.com.

"In addition, internet prices are still out of reach for many people," he added.

The publication ceremony of the preliminary report took place at the BBS auditorium in Dhaka.

Presided over by Md Matiar Rahman, director general of the BBS, Shahnaz Arefin, secretary of the Department of Statistics and Informatics Division, attended the event as special guest.

In contrast, Arefin said the report shows there is not much difference in internet penetration between urban and rural areas.

"The gap between them is not far enough to be fearful. As we want a smart

Bangladesh, we have to know the current situation. So, instead of conducting such a survey, we need to conduct a census on it," she added.

Arefin then said the census would have to be conducted under an umbrella project from door to door.

Moreover, she said this survey has conveyed the number of cellular phones being used but did not refer the number of active sim cards as many mobile phone users often use more than one.

She then requested the BBS officials to include the information in the next survey. BBS Director General Rahman said the survey shows that Bangladesh is a directly or indirectly digitalised country.

"Although all the people don't have smartphones, they can easily get access to digital facilities from the nearest council in rural areas," he said.

"So, we can say that directly or indirectly, Bangladesh is now digitalised country," Rahman added.

Taken up in July 2021 at a cost of Tk 4.99 crore, Syeda Marufa Shaki, project director, delivered a presentation on the survey at the event.

Oil prices fall

REUTERS, London

Oil prices fell on Wednesday as concerns about an upsurge in Covid-19 cases in China, the world's top oil importer, outweighed expectations easing pandemic restrictions would lead to economic recovery and growth in demand for fuel.

Brent futures for February delivery fell 42 cents, or 0.5 per cent, to \$83.91 a barrel, by 1215 GMT. US crude fell 32 cents, or 0.4 per cent, to \$79.21 per barrel.

Both benchmarks fell by over \$1 per barrel earlier in the session after rising to their highest in three weeks on Tuesday on expectations of a rise in fuel demand.

China said it will stop requiring inbound travellers to go into quarantine from January 8, a major step towards relaxing stringent curbs on its borders.

China's civil aviation authority said it would fully restore pre-pandemic flight procedures by the summer-autumn of 2023.

Chinese hospitals have been under intense pressure due to a surge in Covid-19 infections as the country moves towards treating the virus as endemic.

"Even after China eased Covid restrictions, it is difficult for demand to recover in a short time due to the rapid decline of people's outdoor activities due to the massive infection (numbers)," said Leon Li, an analyst at CMC Markets.

Oil refiners in the United States on Tuesday worked to resume operations at a dozen facilities knocked offline by freezing weather across much of the country, a recovery that in some cases will stretch into January.

The Arctic blast cut oil and gas production from North Dakota and Texas.

Dollar rises vs yen, declines against sterling

REUTERS, London

The dollar touched a one-week high against the yen on Wednesday, boosted by a jump in Treasury yields and investor expectations for a rebound in Chinese growth as Covid-19 curbs loosen.

Meanwhile, the pound headed towards its largest one-day rise against the dollar in two weeks as UK markets reopened after a long weekend.

Gilts, which have not traded since Friday, came under pressure in line with a sell-off in global government bonds the previous day, which pushed yields up and further supported the pound.

The yen also eased after the Bank of Japan signalled that a surprise policy shift last week did not mark the start of a broader withdrawal of monetary stimulus.

The dollar rallied by as much as 0.67 per cent to 134.40 in Asian trading, the most since December 20, when the BOJ sent the pair spiralling lower with an unexpected loosening of the 10-year Japanese government bond yield policy band.

That day the yen staged its biggest one-day rally against the dollar in 24 years, closing 3.8 per cent higher, as traders speculated about an eventual unwinding of stimulus.

Top taxpayers honoured

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Media also received the tax card for paying the highest amounts of tax.

Md Kamrul Hassan, chief financial officer of Transcom, received the tax card on behalf of Shahnaz Rahman. ASM Nazrul Islam, head of corporate affairs and tax of The Daily Star, received the tax card on behalf of Mahfuz Anam.

Separately, the National Board of Revenue (NBR) awarded 525 individuals who paid the highest amount of tax and for the longest period of time at the district and city corporation level.

"I really feel honoured," said Dr Pran Gopal Datta, former vice-chancellor of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, after receiving the crest and tax card as a top taxpayer among doctors in fiscal year 2021-22.

He started paying tax since 1983. "I think it's a moral responsibility to pay taxes," he said at the event, where Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal was present.

To bring all those eligible under the tax net, he said the tax authority should explain the benefits of tax payment to people.

Only then, they will feel encouraged to pay taxes, he said.

For more than a decade, the NBR has been giving tax cards

and awards to the top taxpayers to motivate people to be compliant and create a culture of tax payment in the country of nearly 17 crore population with over 80 lakh registered taxpayers.

Yet, only around 30 lakh taxpayers file income tax returns regularly

although the government estimates the number of people having the capacity to pay tax would be around 4 crore.

At the event, NBR Chairman Abu Hena Md Rahmatul Muneem said taxpayers are playing a key role in taking the country forward.

"It is because of the taxpayers that the government is able to implement various development activities," he said.

Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal, said paying taxes is not just a responsibility. It is a good thing, he said.



Prothom Alo Editor and Publisher Matiar Rahman receives an award and a tax card from Abu Hena Md Rahmatul Muneem, chairman of the National Board of Revenue (NBR), at Officers' Club Dhaka yesterday for being one of the individuals who deposited some of the highest amounts of tax in fiscal year 2021-22. PHOTO: COLLECTED

Tourism takes off

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Currently, 70 per cent of the hotel's rooms are booked.

"We expect this trend to continue till March next year," Awal told The Daily Star over the phone.

The scenario is similar at other holiday spots.

The Palace Luxury Resort in Habiganj, a north-eastern district famous for its green tea gardens, has been almost fully booked every day during the ongoing winter season.

"The gathering of tourists is quite good. We are getting a good response from both individuals and business travellers," said Joseph Gomes, general manager of the resort.

A fair number of visitors were seen at the same time last year but there were apprehensions over the different types of Covid-19 restrictions still in place.

"This time though, there is nothing to stop them from enjoying without any fear," Gomes added.

Kuakata in Patuakhali is also seeing a great turnout for its panoramic sea view that provides a great place to watch the sunrise and sunset.

The region's connectivity with Dhaka and other parts of the country improved considerably after the launch of Padma Bridge, increasing the interest of local and foreign travel enthusiasts and holidaymakers.

Businesspeople in Kuakata say the arrival of tourists started increasing from December 15.

Abdus Shakur, manager of Khan Palace, a residential hotel in Kuakata, said he hopes to make up for pandemic-induced losses if the current trend holds steady for the next few days.

The number of tourists was very low until December 10 due to various reasons, including political issues.

"So, the business situation was quite bad, but now there is improvement," said Pradip Sanyal, executive director of the Bhawal Resort and Spa in Gazipur.

"All our rooms are booked now

on Fridays and public holidays," he added.

Bangladesh has more than 1,000 tourist spots, including the Sundarbans, Saint Martin's Island and Sajek Valley, that many people visit each year.

However, not all of them are accessible at the moment.

Imranul Alam, managing director of Tour Group Bangladesh, said a large number of tourists go to Saint Martin's every winter but this year their numbers are less due to the number of ships being limited.

"Nearly 10,000 people would go to the island every day in the past but now, an average of about 500 people are going there," Alam added.

He then said many young people go hiking and trekking in Bandarban during the winter and rainy seasons. Now though, there is a ban on travelling to several places in Bandarban.

"Apart from this, Srimangal and Sajek also have fewer tourists than normal times," he said, alleging that the increased cost of living has dashed the desires of many middle-class travellers.

Rafeuzzaman, the immediate past president of the Tour Operators Association of Bangladesh, said domestic tourism is doing very well this season.

However, the number of tourists coming from outside the country is not at the expected level during this period. One of the reasons for this is high inflation in many countries due to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war.

Rafeuzzaman then said they are trying to offer better tourism services. "Neighbouring countries offer tourism services that are much cheaper than ours. So, we are trying to provide that kind of service," he added.

There were 40 lakh to 50 lakh tourists in Bangladesh about two years ago, and the number has since gone up to 2 crore, according to data from Bangladesh Tourism Board.

More time for buying bike

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numbers for every two-wheeler sold from September 15 onwards in an effort to reduce road accidents. The deadline was then extended for the first time until December 14.

The authorities then issued another circular on December 15, giving another two months on request of the Bangladesh Motorcycle Assemblers and Manufacturers Association.

This means that motorcycle sellers can sell two-wheelers to buyers that do not have a valid driving licence until February 14, 2023.

Textile millers worried

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The local millers import the cotton, other raw materials and machineries with money borrowed from the central bank's Export Development Fund (EDF). So, if the business is lost for any reason, loan repayments may turn into a challenge for them.

Moreover, the local spinners may lose money if the back-to-back LCs are settled in the local currency instead of the dollar because of the gap in the exchange rate.

On the other hand, the BKMEA in another letter to the central bank a month ago urged for allowing opening of back-to-back LCs in local

currency instead of the dollar mainly to address the challenges of the dollar crisis in the banking system.

"It is a temporary measure. If the dollar crisis is resolved, the central bank will withdraw the decision," said Mohammad Hatem, executive president of the BKMEA.

Hatem said many exporters are facing challenges while importing raw materials for export purposes because of the dollar crisis.

As a result, the central bank can take the measure for a temporary period, he said. It is expected that the dollar crisis will dissipate within the next six months, he said.

Taxpayers can file return on Jan 1

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tax administration and human resource management at the NBR.

"We are getting good responses from taxpayers," she said.

Bangladesh has more than 80 lakh registered taxpayers but 27.5 lakh taxpayers filed their income and wealth statements to the tax offices for the current assessment year of 2022-23 until December 22 this year, said a senior official of the NBR.