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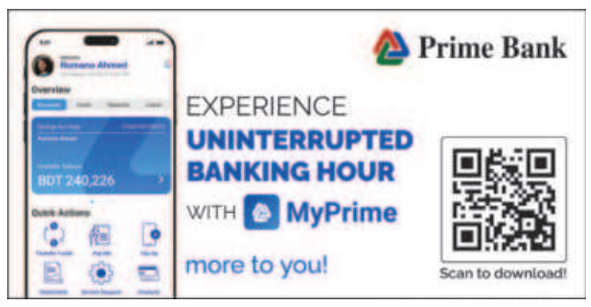

Two panels formed to start Cepa talks with India

REFAYET ULLAH MIRDHA

The commerce ministry has formed two separate committees to start negotiations with India over signing a proposed Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (Cepa) to boost bilateral trade and investment in the post-LDC period.

The negotiation committee is headed by Additional Secretary to the commerce ministry Noor Mahbubul Haque while the advisory committee by Senior Commerce Secretary Tapan Kanti Ghosh.

"We will start the negotiations soon as we are ready now," Ghosh told The Daily Star.

Formal negotiation of the Cepa was supposed to be launched a few months ago but has been delayed a bit as the Indian side

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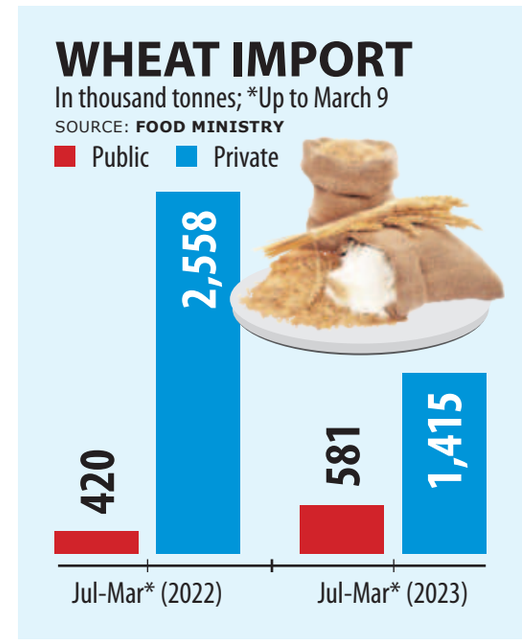
Artisans of Chattogram city's Ambagan Bihari Colony who specialise in zardozi and karchupi work, which are essentially intricate designs done by hand with beads and metal thread embroidery, are working day and night to cater to orders for clothes including three-pieces, saris and panjabis of different boutiques of the region ahead of upcoming Eid-ul-Fitr. The photo was taken recently.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN



Private wheat imports slump 45%

SOHEL PARVEZ

Wheat imports by the private sector have continued to remain low in Bangladesh than the last fiscal year as businesses are facing persisting difficulties in opening letters of credits owing to the dollar shortage at banks.

Businesses brought 14.15 lakh tonnes of wheat between July 1 to March 9 in the current fiscal year of 2022-23, down from 25.58 lakh tonnes recorded during the identical period a year ago. On the other hand, public sector imports soared 38 per cent during the period, food ministry data showed.

Despite the surge in the public sector import, overall imports fell 33 per cent year-on-year, affecting the supply of cereal in the domestic

READ MORE ON B3

Govt cuts sugar prices by Tk 3 per kg

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The retail prices of packaged and loose sugar have been reduced by Tk 3 per kilogramme (kg) to Tk 109 and Tk 104 respectively effective from April 8, according to a notification from the commerce ministry issued yesterday.

The announcement comes more than two weeks after refiners were asked to cut sugar prices in line with the reduction of import duties for raw and refined sugar by the National Board of Revenue.

On February 26, the customs authority withdrew the Tk 3,000 specific duty imposed on each tonne of imported raw sugar and Tk 6,000 for the same amount of refined sugar with immediate effect.

It also cut the regulatory duty to 25 per cent from 30 per cent.

The commerce ministry said it adjusted the prices of the sweetener as per the decisions taken in a taskforce meeting on March 19 and appeals from refiners.

On March 19, refiners were asked to cut their

READ MORE ON B3

Labaid to invest Tk 1,000cr for 2nd cancer hospital

AHSAN HABIB

Labaid is going to invest Tk 1,000 crore to build its second cancer hospital in order to meet the growing demand from patients suffering from the deadly disease and support healthcare research, according to a top official.

The new quaternary hospital named Labaid Super Specialty Hospital will be built in the capital's Baridhara and will have 500 operational beds and 200 day-care beds. A quaternary-level care facility is more specialised than a tertiary-level hospital.

The initiative from the private healthcare service provider comes as the facilities to treat cancer patients has remained inadequate in Bangladesh despite the rising number of patients with various forms of cancer, forcing people to seek treatments abroad.

Currently, Bangladesh has just one public hospital -- National Institute of Cancer Research & Hospital having 500 beds -- that treats cancer patients. Only three hospitals in the private sector are in operation in the segment.

But according to a World Health Organisation report, there are around 15 lakh cancer patients in Bangladesh with 150,000 dying each year. Every year two lakh people are attacked by cancer.

The Global Cancer Observatory estimates that 109,000 people died of cancer in Bangladesh in 2020. It was 108,137 in 2018 and 91,300 in 2012.

Labaid launched its first 200-bed cancer hospital in the capital's Green Road considering huge demand, said Sakif Shamim, managing director of Labaid Cancer Hospital and Super Speciality Centre.

"We launched our first cancer hospital two years ago and we have been getting a huge response from patients."

According to Shamim, the number of cancer patients in the country might be much higher than estimated since the quality of treatment at the hospital is alike the standard of Singapore.

Labaid has collaboration agreements with Singapore General Hospital and the National Cancer Center of Singapore for its first cancer hospital.

Under the new plan, Labaid authorities plan to offer treatment facilities in line with the standard seen in the US.

"We are going to ink an agreement with New York-based Mount Sinai Hospital, which will be our co-partner," Shamim said.

Labaid and Mount Sinai Hospital have already signed a term sheet and the final agreement is expected to be signed soon.

A term sheet is a nonbinding agreement that shows the basic terms and conditions of an investment. But it serves as a basis for more detailed, legally binding documents.

Bangladesh has no hospital that is included in the top 100 healthcare facilities in the world. But Shamim said Labaid has set a target to enter the ranking.

The proposed cancer hospital will also have a trauma management and injury clinic and will treat first- and second-degree burn patients.

The necessary funds for the hospital would be mobilised through equity investments, borrowing from banks, and/or issuing bonds.

The planned hospital will have five institutes and around 35 departments and a research centre. It will also have cardiac, neuro, pediatric and kidney transplant units.

Each department will have a separate section for adult and child patients. The hospital will

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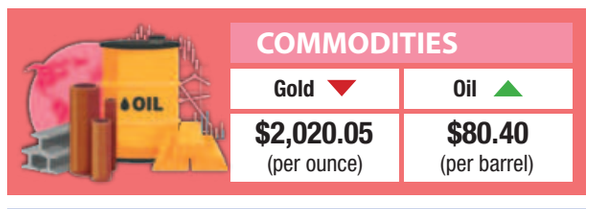

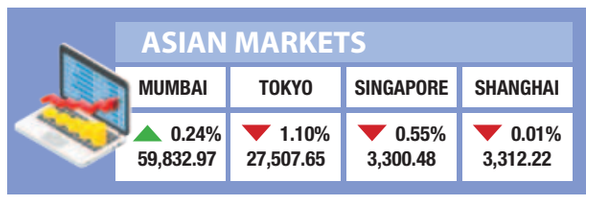

PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

A tour boat is cruising down a river of the Sundarbans, which is a popular destination for vacationers in Bangladesh. As per an estimate by Tour Operators Association of Bangladesh, at least 10 lakh people visit various tourist spots across the country during the Eid holiday.

Advance bookings for Eid vacationers going slow

Insiders blame runaway inflation

JAGARAN CHAKMA

Advance bookings for flights and lodging for the upcoming Eid holiday are going slower compared to last year due to the ongoing inflationary pressure resulting from an economic crisis, according to industry insiders.

"Till now, pre-bookings for accommodation at hotels and resorts on the occasion of Eid-ul-Fitr stands at around 28 to 30 per cent compared to 40 per cent last year," said Md Shohanur Rahman Swapan, director of public relations of the Tour Operators Association of Bangladesh (TOAB).

Swapan then said Cox's Bazar is the most preferred destination for vacation goers followed by Sylhet, the Sundarbans and Chittagong Hill Tracts in that order.

As per an estimate by TOAB, at least 10 lakh people visit various tourist spots across Bangladesh during the Eid holiday. However, hotels and resorts in the country have a collective capacity to accommodate just 2 lakh tourists at a time.

"Even student tour booking, which accounts for around 10-12 per cent of the total travellers, fell to almost zero over the past three months," he added.

Inflation climbed to 9.33 per cent in March, maintaining escalated price levels in the country, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics.

Still, bookings by upper-middle class and higher-income groups have not changed as inflationary pressure does not really affect the premium segment of customers.

As such, holiday spots will surely fill up by the Eid holiday, Swapan said.

Kamrul Islam, general manager of public relations at US-Bangla Airlines, said around 80 per cent of the seats available for flights centring the Eid holiday are already booked while the remaining 20 per cent will follow-suit by the 25th day of Ramadan.

However, advance sales are slower now as around 90 per cent of the flights were booked by the first two weeks of Ramadan last year.

"The current financial condition people are in has slowed advance sales of tickets for the Eid holiday," Islam added.

Abdul Awal, director of marketing and sales at Royal Tulip, a luxury hotel in Cox's Bazar, said 25 per cent of their available rooms have been booked ahead of the Eid celebrations.

He believes that like previous years, all the rooms will be booked by the 20th day of Ramadan.

READ MORE ON B3

Mahtab joins Bangladesh Finance as director

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Non-banking financial institution Bangladesh Finance yesterday appointed a new director in its board of directors.

The appointee, Mahtab Uddin Ahmed, previously served mobile network operator Robi as managing director and chief executive officer, said a press release.

He previously worked for Unilever Bangladesh as national finance director and served in top positions of several domestic and multinational organisations at home and abroad.

In his reaction, Mahtab said he was proud to join Bangladesh Finance as a director and would contribute to the future success of the organisation.

Saudi Arabia raises crude prices for Asia

REUTERS, *Singapore*

Saudi Arabia, the world's top oil exporter, has raised the prices of its flagship crude for Asian buyers for the third straight month.

The official selling price (OSP) for May-loading Arab Light to Asia was raised by 30 cents a barrel from April to $2.80 a barrel over Oman/Dubai quotes.

The price increase is in line with a Reuters survey of sources from Asian refiners and follows a production cut from the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and their allies (Opec+) which is expected to tighten the supply from the Middle East.

The Opec+ group caught the market off guard on Sunday by announcing a 1.16 million barrels per day (bpd) cut from May to the rest of the year.

A vendor arranges different types of dried fish for sale in Jamal Khan area of Chattogram city, with every 100 gramme selling anywhere from Tk 100 to Tk 200, especially to small and low-income families. The photo was taken recently. PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Weekly stocks slightly carefree after a long time

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Stocks listed with the Dhaka Stock Exchange (DSE) rose slightly over the past week following three weeks of constant decline.

DSEX, the benchmark index of the country's premier bourse, added 7.4 points over the past five days to close yesterday's trading session at 6,214 points.

However, the DS30, which represents blue-chip stocks, shed 10.5 points to hit 2,198 points while the DSES, an index comprised of shariah-compliant companies, lost 1.4 points to reach 1,347 points at the same time.

Although the market had opened the week on an upbeat note, it witnessed mild corrections during the latter two sessions to finish marginally higher, International Leasing Securities said in its weekly review.

Investor buoyancy was observed during the week as their participation increased thanks to the regulator's initiative to increase the investment limit of mutual funds to 80 per cent from 60 per cent in the equity market, it added.

The average daily turnover, an indicator of the market's liquidity, increased 41.2 per cent compared to the previous week to stand at Tk 578.7 crore.

Although the market had opened the week on an upbeat note, it witnessed mild corrections during the latter two sessions to finish marginally higher, International Leasing Securities said in its weekly review

Sectoral performance showed a mixed pattern. Among the sectors, jute rose 9 per cent, tannery advanced 3.2 per cent, and services and real estate gained 1.7 per cent. On the other hand, travel and leisure dropped 4.1 per cent, pharmaceuticals and chemicals fell 0.4 per cent and ceramics edged down 0.4 per cent.

Investor activity was mainly focused the IT (20.1 per cent), food and allied (12.8 per cent), and pharmaceuticals and chemical (8.2 per cent) sectors for the past five days, it added.

The stock market has been suffering for the last few months as most investors are not taking part in the market amid the floor price mechanism, according to a merchant banker.

The Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission launched floor prices last July in order to halt the freefall of market indices amid the global uncertainty centring Russia's with Ukraine.

Although the regulator partially withdrew the mechanism later in December, it was again reintroduced in March this year.

Due to the floor price, stocks cannot drop to the lowest point where they have a tendency to go. So, investors are not buying stocks thinking that they may fall whenever the floor price is withdrawn, he said.

Especially, institutional investors and foreign investors are not buying stocks at the moment, instead they are trying to sell shares, the merchant banker added.

Shahjalal Islami Bank's profit soars nearly 38%

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Shahjalal Islami Bank Ltd's profit rose nearly 38 per cent year-on-year to Tk 357.66 crore in 2022

The profit stood at Tk 259.33 crore in 2021.

Thus, the Shariah-compliant bank's consolidated earnings per share rose to Tk 3.31 in 2022 from Tk 2.40 in 2021.

Its consolidated net asset value per share improved to Tk 20.32 in the last financial year from Tk 18.35 in 2021 while the consolidated net operating cash flow per share surged to Tk 3.62 from Tk 0.97 during the period.

Shahjalal Islami Bank's board of directors has recommended a 12 per cent cash dividend and a 3 per cent stock dividend for the year that ended on December 31.

Shares of the bank closed down 1.05 per cent at Tk 18.90 on the Dhaka Stock Exchange yesterday.

China services activity jumps on new orders

REUTERS, *Beijing*

China's services activity in March revved up at the quickest pace in 2-1/2 years on robust new orders and job creation and a consumption-led post-Covid recovery, a private-sector survey showed on Thursday.

The Caixin/S&P Global services purchasing managers' index (PMI) rose to 57.8 in March from 55.0 in February, the third consecutive monthly expansion after the government dropped stringent anti-virus curbs late last year. It was the highest reading since November 2020.

The 50-point mark separates expansion and contraction in activity on a monthly basis.

The upbeat figure echoed an official PMI released last week, which shot to the highest level in more than a decade.

Thanks to improvements in customer demand, the rate of new orders was the sharpest since November 2020, the Caixin survey showed. Notably, new export orders in the services sector grew at the fastest pace on record.

PRICES OF KEY ESSENTIALS IN DHAKA CITY

	PRICE (APR 6, 2023)	% CHANGES FROM A MONTH AGO	% CHANGE FROM A YEAR AGO
Fine rice (kg)	Tk 60-Tk 75	0	3.85 ↑
Coarse rice (kg)	Tk 46-Tk 50	0	3.23 ↑
Loose flour (kg)	Tk 55-Tk 58	-4.24 ↓	54.79 ↑
Lentil (kg)	Tk 95-Tk 100	0	0
Soybean (litre)	Tk 168-Tk 175	0.88 ↑	10.65 ↑
Potato (kg)	Tk 22-Tk 25	23.68 ↑	23.68 ↑
Onion (kg)	Tk 30-Tk 40	0	7.69 ↑
Egg (4 pcs)	Tk 42-Tk 45	0	27.94 ↑

SOURCE: TCB

Mohammed Monirul Moula, managing director of Islami Bank Bangladesh, virtually launched a new website and two investment schemes of the bank yesterday. Muhammad Qaisar Ali and Md Altaf Hossain, additional managing directors, Md Nayer Azam and Mohammad Jamal Uddin Mazumder, deputy managing directors, Taher Ahmed Chowdhury, chief anti-money laundering compliance officer, and Md Mostafizur Rahman Siddiquee, chief human resources officer, were present. PHOTO: ISLAMI BANK BANGLADESH

Russian economic prospects 'foggy' as sanctions cut deep

AFP, *Moscow*

The resilience of Russia's economy has over the past year surprised many observers as Moscow adjusts to unprecedented Western sanctions over its assault on Ukraine.

But in a rare public admission, President Vladimir Putin late last month warned of possible economic troubles ahead and urged the government to act quickly.

"The sanctions imposed against the Russian economy in the medium term could really have a negative impact," Putin said at a televised meeting.

It was a major change of tone after Putin earlier said the worst was over, praising the benefits of "economic sovereignty" and insisting that the West's sanctions strategy has backfired.

What exactly is Putin's message?

"Mr. Putin's observation is quite simply realistic," said Arnaud Dubien, director of the Franco-Russian Observatory think tank in Moscow.

Dubien, a veteran Russia expert, said Putin is seeking to further mobilise companies and government officials as Russia is cutting ties with the West.

"The situation is better than expected but do not relax, continue to find alternatives," he said, describing the Kremlin chief's logic.

Alexandra Prokopenko, a former Russian central bank official, suggested that Putin's message primarily targeted companies that have been hit hard by sanctions.

"It's a message to businesses," said Prokopenko, who worked at the central bank between 2017 and 2022 and quit after the start of Moscow's assault on Ukraine.

"You're only safe in Russia under my charge, there's no way back," she said, referring to his possible thinking.

More than a year into Moscow's offensive in Ukraine, the Russian economy finds itself ever more dependent on energy exports to Asia and slipping further behind in many high-value sectors. An exodus of hundreds of thousands of Russians and the Kremlin's mobilisation drive have led to labour force shortages.

Dubien pointed to particular problems in the car industry, which thrived when leading foreign carmakers set up shop in Russia in the early 2000s.

"The sectors most affected by the sanctions such as automotive production is those that were most open to investment and international cooperation," he said.

Customers stand near a closed Uniqlo store at a shopping mall in Moscow on February 13. Japanese Fast Retailing, which owns the clothing chain Uniqlo, suspended operations in Russia. PHOTO: AFP

Russian oil gets backdoor entry into Europe

FROM PAGE B4

grades from Russia's Far East and Arctic grades such as Sokol, Arco, Novy Port and ESPO blend.

Russia's largest oil producer Rosneft and top Indian refiner Indian Oil Corp have signed a term deal to substantially increase and diversify oil grades delivered to India.

As Europe's ban kept Russian products out, India's diesel exports to the continent rose 12-16 per cent to 150,000-167,000 bpd in the last fiscal year, the Kpler and Vortexa data showed.

That accounted for about 30 per cent of India's total gasoil exports, up from 21-24 per cent a year earlier, the data showed.

The key European buyers of Indian diesel are France, Turkey, Belgium and the Netherlands, the Kpler data showed.

Europe accounted for about 50 per cent of India's jet fuel exports, or around 70,000-75,000 bpd in 2022/23, up 40,000-42,000 bpd the previous year, the data showed.

Besides increasing exports to Europe, India has also boosted vacuum gas oil (VGO) shipments to the US

The US took about 11,000-12,000 bpd of VGO in 2022/23, or 65-81 per cent of India's overall exports of the refining feedstock that can be processed further to produce fuels such as gasoline and diesel, the data showed.

In 2021/22, India exported only around 500 bpd of VGO to the United States.

However, India's total annual refined fuel exports in 2022/23 were lower than a year earlier as some refiners shut units for maintenance in later half of 2022.

German factory output up more than expected

AFP, *Germany*

German industrial production rose more than expected in February thanks to a strong bounce in the car industry as the sector begins to shake off supply issues, official data showed Thursday.

Output rose two percent on the previous month after rebounding 3.7 per cent in January, seasonally adjusted figures from the federal statistics agency Destatis showed.

Factset analysts had expected industrial production to stagnate in February.

The outlook for companies brightened in the first quarter "with the order situation remaining good and supply bottlenecks gradually disappearing", the German economy ministry said in a statement.

Bangladesh is the second largest apparel exporting country in the world and has 6.37 per cent share in global apparel trade.

PHOTO: STAR/FILE

BGMEA again seeks duty benefit for apparel made from US cotton

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

In a gap of a month, Bangladeshi garment makers have sent their second letter to the US senators and governors seeking duty-free benefit on export of locally made apparels made from imported American cotton.

Last month, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) sent their first letter to Greg Abbott, governor of Texas, Ted Cruz senator from Texas, and Peter Haas, US ambassador to Bangladesh.

On April 4, a similar letter was sent to John Boozman, senator for Arkansas, Jon Ossoff, senator for Georgia, and Kevin McCarthy, speaker of the house and congressman of California's 20th congressional district.

The second letter was also sent to Raphael Warnock, senator for Georgia, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, governor of the states of Arkansas, Tom Cotton, senator for Arkansas, and Brian P Kemp, governor of the states of Georgia.

The BGMEA mentioned in the letter that the Bangladesh government eased the rules of mandatory fumigation tests on February 19 for importing cotton from Western Hemisphere countries or regions that cover the USA.

The relaxation of the rule will certainly make trades easier, reduce time and cost of importing US cotton, the garment makers' platform said.

Bangladesh's garments face a 15.62 per cent tariff in the US market.

In 2022, Bangladesh's apparel export reached $45.71 billion, around 71.89 per cent or $32.86 billion of which was cotton garments

Bangladesh, the world's second largest apparel exporting country, has 6.37 per cent share in global apparel trade, according to the BGMEA.

In 2022, Bangladesh's apparel export reached $45.71 billion, around 71.89 per cent or $32.86 billion of which was cotton garments.

Despite the challenges, including the Covid-19 pandemic, Bangladesh's apparel shipment rose 8.73 per cent annually in the last 10 years, which reflects the country's potential in the world market, the BGMEA said in the letter to the US.

Digitalising business processes to increase tax collection

Says secretary to Financial Institutions Division

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

There is still ample scope to increase revenue collection by improving the tax administration's efficiency by digitalising the entire business process, said Sheikh Mohammad Salim Ullah, secretary to Financial Institutions Division of the Ministry of Finance.

When formulating the use of revenue through the budget, the government has to take into consideration a multitude of factors such as macro-economic, fiscal and monetary conditions, he said.

He was addressing a pre-budget discussion for 2023-24 organised by the Institute of Cost and Management Accountants of Bangladesh (ICMAB) on its premises in Dhaka on April 4, said a press release.

Addressing the event, Sayema Haque Bidisha, professor of the Department of Economics of the University of Dhaka, said Bangladesh has been adversely affected by the worldwide economic crisis stemming from the pandemic and Russia-Ukraine war.

So, Bangladesh has to tackle the crisis prudently, combating the challenge over containing high inflation while creating employment, she said.

The ICMAB has forwarded 62 proposals to the National Board of Revenue on February 16, many of which were on increasing the tax revenue.

Abdur Rahman Khan, president of the ICMAB, informed that they had also proposed that the selection of tax returns for audit should be based on an automated system focusing risk analysis for ensuring transparency and eliminating unnecessary harassment of compliant taxpayers.

The ICMAB also emphasised eliminating "discriminatory laws and regulations".

BASIS calls for Japanese investment in IT

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Japan's IT industry should invest in Bangladesh as the South Asian country is poised to become the next IT destination, said Russell T Ahmed, president of Bangladesh Association of Software Information Services (BASIS).

"Bangladesh's fast-moving IT or IT-enabled services sector is poised to open up new opportunities for Japanese ICT entrepreneurs and investors," he said Wednesday.

He was speaking at a seminar titled 'Digital Bangladesh: Your IT Destination' at the Japan IT Week 2023 at the Tokyo Big Site in Japan.A 27-member delegation from 15 Bangladeshi IT companies led by Ahmed is now taking part in the three-day Japan IT Week, which ends today.

The event is known as the meeting place for IT professionals in Asia. "In the field of IT sector, Bangladesh has skilled manpower and Japan has advanced information technology.

In this case, I hope that both countries will benefit if Bangladesh and Japan work together to make maximum use of the skills of both countries," Ahmed said.

"Bangladesh is the next destination for IT investors. Bangladesh IT companies are capable of providing products and services according to any international demand. Bangladesh's success in the international software and app market is also enviable."

BASIS has been working for several years to explore Japan's IT market and facilitate Japanese investment in Bangladesh in building a Smart Bangladesh and real development of the ICT sector, he said.

Shahabuddin Ahmed, ambassador of Bangladesh to Japan; AKM Ahmedul Islam, a director of BASIS, and Ariful Haque, minister (commerce) at the embassy of Bangladesh in Tokyo, also spoke.

Oil heads for 3rd weekly gain

REUTERS, *London*

Oil remained on track for weekly gains on Thurday, with further production cuts targeted by Opec+ and a drop in US oil inventories overshadowing fears over global economic growth.

Brent and US crude have both gained more than 6 per cent this week, heading for a third weekly gain after the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (Opec) and allies including Russia - a group known as Opec+ - pledged surprise production cuts.

Crude dipped on Thursday, however, as weak US economic data raised concern over economic growth. The US services sector slowed more than expected in March and US job openings in February dropped to their lowest in nearly two years.

"The oil market's bullish momentum may have paused, but upside potential remains given the tightening supply backdrop," said Stephen Brennock of oil broker PVM.

Private wheat imports slump

FROM PAGE B1

market, which is highly dependent on imported grain for the dearth of local production.

"The main reason is the delay in the opening of LCs for the dollar shortage. Even when we can open LCs, we are facing delays in getting confirmation from foreign banks," said Md Aminul Islam, managing director of Nabil Group, an importer of wheat.

"These factors have kept the import of wheat lower. Otherwise, everything is okay. The grain is available in the international market and prices have declined as well."

Wheat prices, which shot up to $492 per tonne in the April-June period of 2022, declined to $369 a tonne in March this year, showed World Bank's commodities price data.

At home, the price of the grain started to rise after April in 2022 impacted by the spike in the prices in the global market amid supply concerns in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and export restrictions imposed by a number of countries, namely India.

As such, wheat flour prices hit Tk 62.26 per kilogramme, the highest on record, in Dhaka in December 2022, data from the Food and Agriculture Organisation showed.

Prices moderated marginally in the first quarter of 2023, thanks to a grain deal brokered by the United Nations and Turkey. The deal allowed resumption of the movement of the cereal from Ukraine through the Black Sea. Last month, Russia agreed to extend the deal for 60 days.

"Local companies were able to import wheat from Ukraine and Russia after the deal," said Taslim Shahriar, deputy general manager of the Meghna Group of Industries.

He said wheat import suffered a lot in the July-November period because of the supply disruptions in the global market caused by the war and the export restrictions. The problems in LC opening also affected imports.

Amid the US dollar shortage, the central bank has tightened rules to curb imports, particularly those related to non-essential and luxury items, with a view to stopping fast-depletion of the foreign currency reserves, which have been fallen by 30 per cent in the past one year.

"However, wheat imports have increased in the first quarter of 2023," Shahriar added.

The prices of flour edged down marginally in the last one month and the loose flour was selling at Tk 55-58 a kg in the retail markets in Dhaka yesterday, down 4 per cent from a month ago, according to data from the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh.

The prices of flour, the second-most consumed cereal in Bangladesh, however, were up 55 per cent from a year earlier.

"There is a supply crunch in the domestic market because of lower imports," said Islam of Nabil Group.

"Prices will decline by 10-15 per cent if all companies can import properly."

Bangladesh produces around 11 lakh tonnes of wheat against an annual requirement of 75 lakh tonnes.

Two panels formed

FROM PAGE B1

wanted to further examine a joint study, he said.

Now the new date will be finalised in consultation with both countries for launching the negotiation, as Bangladesh is ready, he said.

In September last year, both Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh and Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India in a joint statement welcomed the recent finalisation of the joint feasibility study which recommended that a Cepa would be beneficial for both countries.

They directed trade officials on both sides to start negotiations within 2022 and to complete these at the earliest, in time for Bangladesh's final graduation from the least developed country (LDC) status, the joint statement also said.

The signing of the Cepa with India is also a part of the country's preparation to face the challenges of the LDC graduation in 2026, said Ghosh.

Because the status graduation to a developing country will also erode Bangladesh's preferential trade benefits, he said.

Currently, India is the second largest source of imports for Bangladesh after China.

Annually, Bangladesh imports nearly $15 billion worth of goods like textiles and fabrics, industrial raw materials and intermediate goods, food items, cotton and chemicals for industrial use.

On the other hand, as an LDC, Bangladesh has been enjoying duty-free benefits on export to India under South Asian Free Trade Area (Safta), a free trade arrangement of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc).

Bangladesh's exports to India amount to nearly $2 billion annually.

In August last year, the joint study said Bangladesh might not make a large gain from a Cepa. This was due to the fact that Bangladesh would lose duty-free market access provided for it being an LDC.

Comparatively, India will make a larger gain from the trade deal primarily through the removal of high tariff rates it currently faces in Bangladesh, said the study.

Bangladesh Foreign Trade Institute (BFTI) and the Centre for Regional Trade (CRT) of India jointly conducted the study last week based on trade data between 2015 and 2020.

If signed, the CEPA will be the first free trade agreement of its kind as Bangladesh has till date signed only a preferential trade agreement with Bhutan in December 2020.

Moreover, Bangladesh has the potential to benefit from the trade of services in tourism, transport and educational cooperation and also creation of jobs locally from Indian investment.

The proposed deal, which calls for a withdrawal of duties, is expected to boost Bangladesh's exports by 190.15 per cent and more if transaction costs are also reduced through improved connectivity, according to the study.

India's exports to Bangladesh are expected to increase by 188 per cent. The Cepa will increase Bangladesh's GDP by 1.72 per cent and India's by 0.03 per cent, the study found.

Bangladesh has also been negotiating with Japan for signing either an economic partnership agreement or free trade agreement to continue the trade benefit in the post-LDC period, Ghosh also said.

Labaid to invest Tk 1,000cr

FROM PAGE B1

include a rehabilitation centre and a pain management centre.

"The clinical research centre will be modern and technologically upgraded, with a focus on cancer research," said Shamim.

"Bangladesh has lagged behind when it comes to research and it was even more evident during the coronavirus pandemic. So, we have included the research centre in our hospital."

The hospital will have 250 beds in the first phase and the number of beds would be increased in the second phase considering the occupancy rate.

The company has already bought a piece of land for the hospital and received a no-objection certificate from the city corporation to use the land. It has secured approval from the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority and the health ministry for establishing the hospital as well.

The feasibility study has been carried out and the operational and business plans have been formulated.

Now, EK Architects, one of the leading architectural firms in Bangladesh, is preparing the design in association with architects from the US, Singapore and India.

Labaid plans to submit a plan to Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha within a few months for approval.

The hospital spanning 7 lakh square feet of space would be built on 1.5 acres of land. It will be a 23-storey building with five basement floors.

The new hospital is scheduled to go into operation in 2025.

Labaid Cancer Hospital and Super Speciality Centre on Green Road has a hybrid module operation theatre so its infection rate has been zero so far and the recovery rate is faster, Shamim said, adding that patients are not needed to stay at the intensive care units and high dependency units after surgery.

"At 30 per cent, our survival rate is quite good."

The chief executive said the cost of cancer treatment at the hospital would be similar to hospitals in India in some cases. In other cases, the costs would be higher.

"But if transportation and accommodation expenditures are taken into account, the treatment cost would be higher abroad than in Bangladesh."

Advance bookings

FROM PAGE B1

Royal Tulip has 493 rooms, including deluxe suites, with rent ranging between Tk 6,500 and Tk 50,000 per night.

"We also provide different offers and discounts to attract tourists. So, there will be full occupancy during the Eid holiday," Awal added.

Similarly, Md Emran Hossain, manager of the Long Beach Hotel in Cox's Bazar, said 40 per cent of their rooms have been booked so far.

Usually, advance bookings are complete by the third week of Ramadan, he added.

Md Saidul Islam Bhuiyan Romel, head of marketing and sales at the Grand Sultan Tea Resort & Golf in Sreemangal upazila of Moulvibazar, said they expect full occupancy during the Eid holiday even though pre-bookings have yet to pick up.

"Basically, bookings start in full swing after the 20th day of Ramadan," he added.

Romel agreed though that overall bookings are slower than previous years for the inflationary pressure as everyone, sans the financially sound, are adopting various austerity measures.

"We have 135 rooms and the average rent is Tk 30,000 per night, so only high-income people stay here," he said.

Subrata Chakma, manager of the Khasrang Hill Resort in Sajek Valley of Rangamati, said pre-bookings for Eid have already started as there is limited accommodation in the area.

"But the percentage of advance booking is still insignificant," Chakma added. According to him, all local resorts and cottages will see full occupancy during Eid as people are drawn to Sajek for its natural environment.

Govt cuts sugar prices

FROM PAGE B1

prices by Tk 5 per kg. On March 27, refiners had urged the government to readjust the rates citing the higher US dollar price, and problems in opening and settling letters of credit, among other factors.

So, the prices were set considering the impact of the import duty cut and the upward global rates of sugar, an official of the commerce ministry said.

The government had fixed the rates of loose and packaged sugar at Tk 107 and Tk 112 respectively on February 1.

Traders in Dhaka's markets yesterday sold sugar at Tk 112 to Tk 115 per kg, which was marginally higher from a week ago, according to the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh.

The Kalapara boat market, one of the oldest in the country, lies some 300 kilometres south of Dhaka in Patuakhali. About 1,000 boats are estimated to be sold here annually, the main customers, according to the boatbuilders, being fishermen of nearby upazilas. The photo was taken last Tuesday.

PHOTO: SOHRAB HOSSAIN

Roads ending golden days of boat trade

SOHRAB HOSSAIN, *Patuakhali*

Anyone in their forties with experience of visiting the countryside might recall the ways they travelled from one place to another.

In the absence of proper rural road infrastructure, boats were one of the main modes of transport for people, whether they wanted to visit relatives living in another village or travel to nearby towns to avail treatment, be it for themselves or their elderlies.

Boats were an integral part of farming as growers used them to move production inputs and transport their crops from fields to home yards and to the market.

Those days have gone.

Boats have been left on the side as people switched to roads. Even farmers now use land transport for farming-related activities. And it is the boat makers, inheriting the profession from their ancestors, who are paying the price.

"Even 10-15 years ago, there was a lot of demand for boats. At that time, we could sell 10-12 boats a week. But due to various reasons, the use and demand for boats has decreased," said Rajiv Hawladar, a boat maker at Chunakhali area of Barguna's Amtalai.

"Now I can sell three to four boats a week, each for between Tk 6,000 and Tk 8,000," said the 40-year-old boat maker, who had gone to the Kalapara weekly market in Patuakhali with newly built boats to find customers.

Boat makers said the demand for boats rises ahead of the rainy season, particularly from fishermen. They fish using small boats in canals and small rivers in their localities.

About 1,000 boats are estimated to be sold annually at the Kalapara market, one of the oldest markets. Fishermen from nearby upazilas buy these boats mainly for fishing, said boat makers.

Hawladar uses wood from locally available trees to make small boats for the local market. If someone wants to buy one of a better quality, the price goes up.

And he has been making boats with skills passed on by his ancestors.

"It will be a hundred-year trade of my family. My father and grandfather made boats and I am doing this now," he said.

Boats were an integral part of farming as growers used them to move production inputs and transport their crops from fields to home yards and to the market.

Not only Hawladar, for Zahidul Islam, making boats provides a livelihood for his family.

Islam takes the help of carpenters to make boats.

Two carpenters can make two boats every three days and get paid Tk 1,000 to Tk 1,500 for each one.

Islam said there was a lot of demand for boats of various sizes in the past, when farmers used boats for their agricultural work, transportation of goods, and various other activities including ferrying people and goods across rivers.

Also, boats were once the main mode of transportation in this riverine region.

But over the years, roads have been developed even in remote areas. Bridges and culverts have been constructed at many points, various types of vehicles including buses, microbuses, motorcycles and autorickshaws have taken the place of boats.

Another boat maker, 52-year-old Abdul Motaleb Howladar, said there was a lot of demand for boats even 20 years to 25 years ago and boat makers did good business.

"Now the demand for boats has decreased. However, I remain in the profession as I do not have any skill other than boat making," he added.

Nitai Sarkar, who takes lease of the boat market, witnessed the gradual decline in the demand for boats.

"I have been running this market for 33 years. Even, 15-20 years ago, 50-60 boats were sold every week. Now the demand for boats has decreased due to various reasons," he said.

For boat makers, small fishermen like Sader Ali continue to be the main buyers. The 45-year-old resident of Fulbunia village in Kalapara upazila of Patuakhali has been fishing for 30 years using small boats bought from the local market.

"If you buy a boat, you can fish with it for at best two years. Boats do not last long as the river water is saline," he said.

Fisherman Abul Kalam came to the boat market last Tuesday as his boat turned unusable after three years. He fishes in the Andharmanik river in the area to bear the expenses of his five-member family.

Abul Hashem, another fisherman, also came to the market to buy a new boat as his existing one cannot be used anymore.

Boat makers like Howladar and Abu Hanif are aware that there is a demand created for people seeking to replace old boats.

And this still provides them a livelihood.

As the monsoon is set to arrive soon, Abu Hanif is also upbeat.

"Demand is higher this year. So, we are making some profit," he said at the boat market, where he was trying to sell five boats.

Ramadan: it's party time!

MAHTAB UDDIN AHMED

Once, two Americans found themselves lost in the Arabian desert without food or water. They came across a mosque and one of them suggested they change their names to pretend they are Muslims to avoid not being helped. But the other refused, saying, "You go ahead being Muhammad while I remain Joe".

At the mosque, a bearded man greeted them with a smile offering how to help.

"Hello, I'm Muhammad and this is Joe. We were wondering if we could have something to eat and drink," asked Roger.

"Why, of course. Joe, we will bring you some food, and for you, Muhammad, we can share a meal at sundown when we break our fast," replied the man. The experience taught the Americans how embracing Islam is and the true spirit of camaraderie and sharing of Ramadan.

Ramadan is the holiest month in the Islamic faith, a time when Muslims try to purify their souls in their attempt to draw closer to Allah. The act of fasting is not only refraining from food and drink but also exercising self-control in our worldly desires.

But how much of this spirit do we see around us today?

Ramadan is increasingly becoming a month of feasting and festivities instead of charity, where profiteering in business, fun, and frolic are the mantra. Far from prioritising worship, a certain section of our society is busy with elaborate iftar parties, many hosted at restaurants.

Iftar parties have turned into iftar-cum-dinners, and, as if that is not satiating their spirit of fun, the innovative minds have started the trend of Sehri parties.

Our corporate houses are not lagging in sporting the "Ramadan spirit" either. Most five-star ballrooms and restaurants are booked in advance by them, where the cost of a meal is enough to feed an entire family for a month.

This lavish feasting shouts bad taste, especially during the current local and international economic crises where the cost of living has increased exponentially with no increase in salary. The hardest hit is the poor, many of whom turn to mosques for free meals. The mayhem gets even crazier with our corporate chanting: "the bigger the crisis, the bigger the opportunity".

It goes without saying that big corporates reap the maximum benefit in a crisis, as was observed during the coronavirus pandemic. A crisis makes the rich richer and the poor poorer.

According to the Bloomberg Billionaires Index, 131 billionaires more than doubled their net worth during the pandemic. In the case of Bangladesh, I couldn't manage any official data to share, but undoubtedly, our wealthy individuals and corporates have had their share of the bounty too.

For corporates that deal with essentials, Ramadan is also a party time, a busy month of counting profits. These same corporate houses are seen racing to outdo each other in boasting their CSR. In reality, such spending is a mere fraction of their massive profit in a crisis, not to mention the artificial crisis they create at such times.

This month, the fashion and food industries are also fraught with a mindless extravaganza. Far from the spirit of Ramadan, a month of moderation, we see people chasing their material desires with greater gusto, bringing city traffic to a pathetic state. The recent launch of Tk 20,000 per kg jalebi with gold targeting the insensitive group is another great example.

Ramadan is only halfway through and it is still not too late to wake up. We can still reap the benefits of this blessed month by practising moderation in all phases of life. I humbly request that all individuals and corporate houses cancel gala iftar events and channel the funds to charity to make others' life easier.

The author is founder and managing director of BuildCon Consultancies Ltd

Eastern Bank clocks over Tk 511cr profit in 2022

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Eastern Bank Limited posted a Tk 511.87 crore profit in 2022, an increase of 6.7 per cent from a year earlier.

Its profit stood at Tk 479.67 crore in 2021.

Thus, the private commercial lender reported consolidated earnings per share of Tk 4.77 for 2022 compared to Tk 4.47 (restated) in 2021.

A restatement is a revision of one or more of a company's previous financial statements to correct an error.

The consolidated net asset value per share of EBL rose to Tk 33.33 last year from Tk 29.48 a year ago while the consolidated net operating cash flow per share turned a negative Tk 0.39 in 2022 from Tk 12.54 in 2021.

The board of directors has recommended a 12.50 per cent cash and a 12.50 per cent stock dividend for the year that ended on December 31.

In a filing on the Dhaka Stock Exchange, EBL said the stock dividend has been recommended to strengthen the capital base in order to support projected business growth and improve certain regulatory ratios.

Shares of the bank were unchanged at Tk 31.80 on the premier bourse of the country yesterday.

Russian oil gets backdoor entry into Europe via India

REUTERS, *New Delhi*

Record high imports of crude oil from Russia in fiscal 2022-23 helped India's refiners boost exports of diesel and jet fuel to Europe as the continent shunned Russian products, preliminary ship-tracking data from Kpler and Vortexa showed.

Access to cheap Russian crude has boosted output and profits at Indian refineries, enabling them to export refined products competitively to Europe and take bigger market share.

Europe typically imported an average of 154,000 barrels per day (bpd) of diesel and jet fuel from India before Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

That increased to 200,000 bpd after the European Union banned Russian oil products imports from Feb. 5, Kpler data showed.

India's imports of Russian crude in March rose for the seventh straight month to end out the fiscal year as top supplier to India, displacing Iraq for the first time, the data showed.

Indian refiners, which rarely bought Russian oil previously due to high transport costs, imported 970,000-981,000 bpd of it in 2022/23, accounting for more than a fifth of overall imports at 4.5-4.6 million bpd, Kpler and Vortexa data showed.

Imports from Iraq slipped to 936,000-961,000 bpd from nearly 1 million bpd in 2021/22, the data showed.

While Russia's flagship grade Urals makes up the bulk of India's purchases, refiners are also importing lighter

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A general view of the Guwahati Refinery operated by Indian Oil Corporation in Guwahati on March 30. On March 29, Russian oil giant Rosneft announced a deal with Indian Oil to substantially increase oil supplies to the firm. India has emerged as a major buyer of Russian oil since the Ukraine war.

PHOTO: AFP

Prime Bank posts nearly Tk 400cr profit in 2022

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Prime Bank Ltd recorded a 23 per cent year-on-year increase of profit to Tk 399.7 crore in the financial year that ended on December 31.

It made a profit of Tk 324.97 crore in 2021.

The private commercial bank, thus, reported consolidated earnings per share of Tk 3.53 for 2022 compared to Tk 2.87 a year ago.

The consolidated net asset value per share of Prime Bank improved to Tk 28.41 in 2022 from Tk 26.26 in 2021 while the consolidated net operating cash flow per share slipped to a negative of Tk 0.28 from a positive Tk 9.65 during the period.

The board of directors has recommended a 17.50 per cent cash dividend for 2022. Shares of Prime Bank rose 1 per cent to Tk 20.30 on the Dhaka Stock Exchange yesterday.