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Day labourers fill up sand bags on board a trawler on the Rupsa river in Khulna. The bags are used to protect embankments from erosion. In Bangladesh, workers are going through a difficult time as their wage growth has not gone up in line with surging inflation. The photo was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

Regulator asks Banglalink to clear Tk 823cr dues

MAHMUDUL HASAN

The telecom regulator has instructed Banglalink to clear dues worth around Tk 823 crore after carrying out an audit into the mobile phone operator for the period from 1996 to 2019.

Of the amount, Tk 393 crore has been sought as VAT, tax and fees, outstanding dues related to revenue sharing, handset royalty, access frequency and microwave frequency payments, and licence fees, according to a letter from the Bangladesh Telecommunication Commission (BTRC).

The rest, or Tk 430 crore, was claimed as late fees.

Shyam Sunder Sikder, chairman of the BTRC, confirmed the matter to The Daily Star.

"We have initiated the audit to ensure transparency and collect the fair share of the government revenue," he said.

In August 2021, the BTRC assigned Masih Muhih Haque & Co and ANB Solution Pvt Ltd to audit Banglalink for the period from November 1996 to December 2019. The audit was finalised in April this year.

The operator has been asked to make the

payments in 10 days.

Banglalink has sought three weeks to respond to the BTRC letter and said it has some disagreements about the findings of the audit but the differences could be resolved through talks.

Of the amount, Tk 393 crore was sought as VAT-tax and various dues and fees, and Tk 430 as late fees

"Banglalink always strives to ensure compliance with the laws and regulations of the country," said Banglalink's Chief Corporate and Regulatory Affairs Officer Taimur Rahman.

"We welcome the audit initiative of the BTRC and extended full cooperation and support to ensure a proper audit. We have now received the audit report."

"Though we have different opinions regarding the findings, we believe that through constructive discussion with the BTRC, we will reach a fair solution," said Rahman.

WORKERS' WOES WON'T END as inflation outpaces wage growth

MD ASADUZ ZAMAN

The cost-of-living crisis seems to have brought more woes for daily workers in Bangladesh than other groups of labourers as their average wage growth has been below the inflation rate for the past two fiscal years.

This means daily workers did not receive any relief from the 12-year high average inflation in the just concluded fiscal year although the wage has been ticking up for the past 17 months.

Data released by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) showed that the average wage of low and unskilled workers was 7.04 per cent in 2022-23 while the Average Consumer Price rose 9.02 per cent.

This results in a 1.98 percentage-point gap between average inflation and wage growth in FY23 against 0.09 percentage points seen a

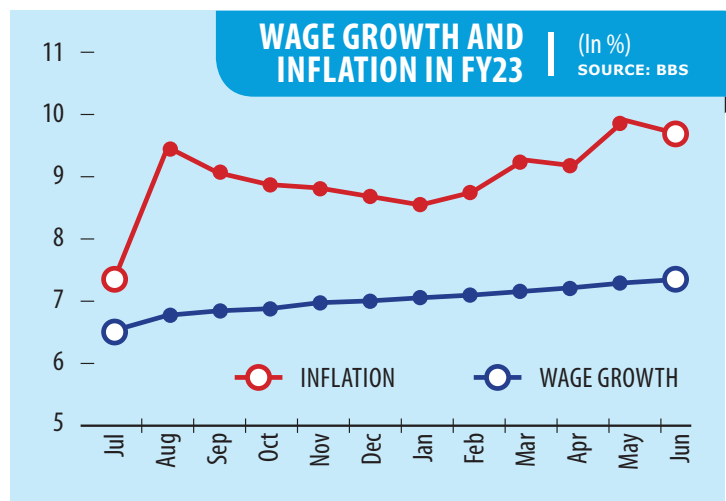
year earlier.

The Wage Rate Index of the national statistical agency takes into account the wages of informal sector workers across 44 occupations in the agriculture, industry and service sectors who get their payments on a daily basis.

In Bangladesh, inflation has been running high for more than a year, owing to the Russia-Ukraine war-induced higher import costs, a larger depreciation of the taka and the upward adjustments of fuel and energy prices as well as domestic market imperfections and syndication.

Analysts say the widening gap between the inflation rate and the wage growth rate is forcing low-income and unskilled workers to cut consumption amid falling real incomes and the rising cost of living.

"The government has supported its employees through



increments, which may have saved their real incomes," said Mustafa K Mujeri, executive director of the Institute for Inclusive Finance and Development.

"But around 85 per cent of workers in Bangladesh belong to the informal sector and they have remained unprotected. This vast majority of workers are totally dependent on the labour market."

Mujeri went on to say that in terms of real wages, workers' earnings have decreased.

"As a result, they are continuously struggling to make ends meet. They have cut costs and other essentials, have failed

to ensure a healthy diet and used up their savings."

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, a construction sector worker Mohammad Ashraful Alam said he is finding it difficult to survive with his limited income.

Alam, who hails from Jamalpur district, earns Tk 650 every day for working in construction companies in the capital.

He has been working in Dhaka for seven months and has not seen his wage increase although consumer prices show no sign of declining.

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UK looks to deepen trade ties with Bangladesh

Says British minister

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The United Kingdom is committed to working with Bangladesh closely to deepen trade and investment ties between the two countries, said UK Minister for International Trade Nigel Huddleston.

He arrived in Dhaka on Tuesday, demonstrating his country's strong ambition to work with Bangladesh to achieve an enhanced trade and investment relationship.

In a statement, the UK High Commission in Dhaka said the UK is committed to working with Bangladesh to create a trade and investment relationship that will create jobs and grow both economies.

The total trade in goods and services between the UK and Bangladesh reached a record 4.7 billion pounds at the end of 2022.

In the statement, Huddleston said, "The UK has a strong and enduring relationship with Bangladesh, and our trade with the country has grown

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Wristwatch market seeing steady uptick

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Wristwatches have long been considered as a status symbol for being a stylish tool that has practical uses while also being a clear indicator of the wearer's social standing.

This is because ever since portable timekeepers were invented in the 16th century, they were only accessible by affluent people and so, their association with luxury persists to this day.

This is true even in least developed countries like Bangladesh, where the growing purchasing power of the country's middle class has propelled the demand for wristwatches over the past decade.

And although there is no reliable data, market insiders believe the demand for regular and premium wristwatches is currently worth around Tk 200 crore with annual growth of about 8 to 10 per cent.

The growing market has attracted numerous international brands over the years with Noise, a leading wristwatch retailer in India, having announced its debut in Bangladesh yesterday.

Noise has entered Bangladesh as a step towards expanding its celebrated smartwatch portfolio by reaching a larger consumer base, the company said in a press release.

Fueled by innovation, design and consumer centricity, the brand revolutionises the way users experience and integrate smart wearable technology to upgrade their lifestyles.

Gaurav Khatri, co-founder of Noise, said they are thrilled to extend their footprint in Bangladesh.

"This strategic move represents an exciting chapter in our brand's journey as we aim to grow and bring our celebrated innovation to the reach of Bangladeshi consumers," he added.

Khatri also said they are committed to empowering individuals with technology that seamlessly integrates into their lives and look forward to providing locals with an unparalleled experience.

Arafat Mohammad Kabir, proprietor of Kabir Watches, said the increasing number of young consumers in Bangladesh is driving the demand for wristwatches.

Kabir, who imports products of 14 international brands such as Aero and Mathey-Tissot, added

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Wheat import falls for third year straight

SOHEL PARVEZ

Bangladesh's wheat imports fell for the third consecutive year, suffered by falling consumption for high prices and banks' sluggishness in opening letters of credit (LCs) amid the US dollar crisis, importers said yesterday.

Wheat arrival declined 3.4 per cent year-on-year to 38.75 lakh tonnes in fiscal year (FY) 2022-23 from 40.12 lakh tonnes the previous year, according to data of the food ministry.

The FY23 import of the grain, for which Bangladesh is highly dependent on the international market, was the lowest in eight years.

With the drop in wheat imports, overall imports of food grains by Bangladesh's public and private sectors declined to 49.30 lakh tonnes, down 1.38 per cent from the previous year.

Anup Kumar Saha, executive director of Akij Insaf Group, said consumption of wheat flour has reduced amid high prices.

"This has impacted imports," he added.

Food ministry data shows that public sector imports edged up in the last fiscal year, but private imports dropped nearly 8 per cent to 31.95 lakh tonnes in the July-June period of FY23.

Wheat prices soared in the international market amid supply crunch after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February last year, and India's ban on shipments of the grain in May the same year aggravated the situation.

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A woman is filling a sack with imported wheat from a dock at Anu Majhir Ghat in Chattogram yesterday. Imports of the grain have fallen for the third consecutive year amid growing prices and the ongoing US dollar shortage.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

| STOCKS | |
|----------|-----------|
| DSEX ▲ | CASPI |
| 0.03% | Flat |
| 6,336.14 | 18,727.13 |

| COMMODITIES | |
|-------------|--------------|
| Gold ▲ | Oil ▲ |
| \$1,928.2 | \$71.13 |
| (per ounce) | (per barrel) |

| ASIAN MARKETS | | | |
|---------------|-----------|-----------|----------|
| MUMBAI | TOKYO | SINGAPORE | SHANGHAI |
| ▼ 0.05% | ▼ 0.25% | ▼ 0.57% | ▼ 0.69% |
| 65,446.04 | 33,338.70 | 3,185.38 | 3,222.95 |