

## UNLOADING GOODS Foreign vessels face hassles getting waivers

DWAIPAYAN BARUA, from Chattogram

Operators of foreign container feeder vessels have allegedly been facing hassles obtaining waiver certificates, which are mandatory for loading cargo to and from Bangladesh.

Around 75 foreign container vessels currently carry around 90 percent of the country's seaborne containerised cargo while 8 Bangladesh-flagged vessels carry the rest.

The Bangladesh Flag Vessels (Protection of Interest) Act 2019 mandates that Bangladesh-flagged vessels carry at least 50 percent of seaborne cargo in the country's foreign trade.

To ensure that, it was made mandatory for foreign-flagged vessels to apply to the Mercantile Marine Department (MMD) in Chattogram to obtain a waiver certificate 15 days before they load any cargo to or from Bangladesh.

However, foreign vessel operators alleged they have been facing delays in getting waiver certificates for several months now.

They added that they sometimes get only one waiver for a single voyage, permitting them to carry

**Around 75 foreign container vessels currently carry around 90 percent of the country's seaborne containerised cargo**

either export or import cargo, which causes financial losses.

In many cases, they alleged waivers were being issued on the condition that their vessels would be kept idle at the port and hold off on loading cargo for a certain period of time, extending vessels' stay at ports.

At other times, vessels have to leave the port without taking on the expected amount of cargo, which hampers the supply chain.

Sources said the situation worsened after the director general (DG) of the Department of Shipping issued a circular on August 30.

One of the decisions conveyed through that circular was that foreign vessels would not get waivers to load imports for 72 hours prior to the arrival of a Bangladeshi vessel at the trans-shipment port.

Similarly, waivers will not be given to load export cargo for 48 hours after the berthing of a Bangladeshi vessel at Chattogram.

Syed Md Arif, chairman of the Bangladesh Shipping Agents Association (BSAA), termed the move discriminatory and detrimental to the trade of foreign vessels.

DG Shipping Commodore Md Maksud Alam, however, said allegations of delays in obtaining waivers and refusal of waivers were incorrect.

He said most foreign ships are issued waivers, with only one or two cases to the contrary. He also ensured they would address any obstacles to foreign trade.

A foreign vessel named 'SOL Resilience' has recently been given a waiver by MMD on the condition that it can berth on October 4 but cannot start loading export cargo till evening on October 5.

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The mobile internet users now account for 90.79 percent of the total internet subscriber base in the country, which stands at 11.97 crore.

PHOTO: STAR/FILE

# Number of internet users showing sharp growth

MAHMUDUL HASAN

The number of internet users in Bangladesh witnessed a notable upswing of 10 lakh in August, predominantly attributed to the expansion of the country's mobile subscriber network.

The rise has brought the cumulative count of internet subscribers to 13.19 crore, according to data of the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC).

Earlier in July, the internet subscriber number surpassed the 13-crore mark for the first time.

This is the 7th consecutive month since February that the internet subscriber base has grown.

In February, the number of internet subscribers saw its first rebound after six months thanks to a jump in mobile internet users.

Then in March and June, the number of broadband users also underwent growth while that of mobile internet users has been growing every month since February.

In August, the increase in mobile internet subscribers solely contributed to the growth.

The mobile internet users now account for 90.79 percent of the total internet subscriber base in the country, which stands at 11.97 crore.

Officials of different mobile network operators attributed



the surge to the burgeoning popularity of a wide range of digital services that extend beyond the realm of social media.

This phenomenon underscores the evolving landscape of consumer preferences and their increasing reliance on digital platforms for a diverse array of services, marking a significant shift in the telecommunication industry's dynamics, they said.

Erik Aas, CEO of Banglalink, recently said that Banglalink has consistently prioritised network quality, which is evident by the 7th consecutive Ookla Speedtest Award.

"Our network superiority is accelerating our growth as a digital operator, enabling customers to smoothly access our diverse services," he said.

"We aim to utilise our fastest 4G network to continue providing best-in-class mobile telecommunication services

and one-stop digital solutions through MyBL Super App and Toffee," Aas added. Shahed Alam, chief corporate and regulatory officer at Robi Axiata Ltd, pointed out a noteworthy shift in customer behaviour.

He said customers are increasingly leveraging the internet for a diverse range of digital services, including over-the-top media and gaming.

"This shift has resulted in a notable expansion of the subscriber base. Previously, mobile internet users primarily utilised our services for social media and YouTube, but their preferences have evolved towards a broader spectrum of digital offerings," Alam added.

Grameenphone recently said that with a continued focus on expanding its network and spectrum rollout, it is prioritising meeting its customers' needs through digital-centric innovation and

services.

This approach establishes the foundation for a future-ready data network, it added.

Meanwhile, broadband internet subscribers remained unchanged at 1.21 crore in August.

It cannot be ascertained if the subscribers increased or decreased as the BTRC provides broadband internet subscriber information on a quarterly basis.

The BTRC calculates broadband subscriber information through market analysis, consultation and data collection from almost all internet service providers. Md Emdadul Hoque, president of the Internet Service Providers Association of Bangladesh, said business growth recently stalled and so did customer acquisition.

"The costly dollar has escalated the cost of equipment as the industry solely relies on imported ones. Besides, some people are refraining from spending on the internet as their purchasing capacity has decreased," he added.

However, it cannot be determined how many individuals use the internet with the BTRC's data since many people use multiple SIMs.

According to Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics, a project run by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 41 percent of people in the country aged above five use the internet.

## BTRC fines Fiber@Home Tk 5 lakh

MAHMUDUL HASAN

The Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) yesterday imposed a Tk 5 lakh fine on Fiber@Home Ltd for providing internet services to end users despite lacking the required licence.

In its notice to Fiber@Home, a nationwide telecommunication transmission network (NTN) service provider, the BTRC directed the company to admit its guilt and pay the penalty within 10 working days.

Failure to do so will lead to legal action against Fiber@Home in accordance with the telecom act, which includes cancelling the company's NTN licence.

The BTRC said Fiber@Home was providing broadband internet services using the equipment, network operating centres and servers of other internet service providers under its "Cyclone Project". This instruction follows a prior notice served to Fiber@Home and Fiber@Home Global Ltd on September 17 for running their broadband business through illegal and unlicensed internet service providers (ISPs) at Sheikh Hasina Software Technology Park in Jashore.

Fiber@Home is a licensed NTN service provider while Fiber@Home Global is an international internet gateway (IIG) operator.

According to BTRC guidelines, NTN and IIG operators cannot run business as ISPs.

In a separate notice, the BTRC instructed the two companies to completely shut down all operational activities related to the Cyclone Project.

The commission also asked members of the Internet Service Providers Association of Bangladesh to refrain from all activities of Fiber@Home and Fiber@Home Global related to the Cyclone Project.

Fiber@Home and Fiber@Home Global said they were not involved in running any business as ISPs.

## USD MANIPULATION

# Treasury heads of 10 banks seek penalty waiver

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The treasury heads of 10 banks have appealed to Bangladesh Bank for waiving a fine that was imposed on them for their alleged involvement in manipulating the US dollar rate.

The treasury heads placed their appeal through separate letters to Bangladesh Bank earlier this week, an official of the central bank said on condition of anonymity.

Md Mezbaul Haque, executive director and spokesperson of Bangladesh Bank, said they imposed the fines as per section 109 (7) of the Bank Company Act 1991.

He informed the issued would be raised at the next board meeting of the central bank, which would then take a final decision on the matter.

An accused treasury head of a private commercial bank told The Daily Star he hopes for a positive response from Bangladesh Bank in this regard.

Upon an inspection by the central bank, it was found that the treasury heads of 10 banks were involved in manipulating the exchange rate between taka and the US dollar this year.

The 10 banks are Social Islami Bank, Al-Arafah Islami Bank, Mercantile Bank, Modhumoti Bank, Midland Bank, BRAC Bank, Exim Bank, Premier Bank, Shahjalal Islami Bank and Trust Bank.

Following the inspection, Bangladesh Bank on September 18 asked the managing directors of these banks to explain within five working days as to why their treasury heads should not be penalised.

Finding their explanations to be unsatisfactory, the central bank decided to impose the fines as per the law, Haque added.

## China warns EU steel probe will push up costs

REUTERS, Beijing

China said on Thursday that European Union plans to investigate its steelmakers over subsidies will disrupt global supply chains and fly in the face of international trade norms.

Brussels is reportedly planning anti-subsidy investigations of steelmakers producing excess in countries such as China, as part of a pact with the United States. In return, the US will not re-impose Trump-era tariffs on EU steel and aluminium.

"The Chinese side believes that the abovementioned actions of the European Union will disrupt the order of international trade," said a spokesperson of China's commerce ministry, He Yadong.

"The EU's practices push up downstream production costs, affecting the interests of consumers, and are not conducive to the stability of global industrial and supply chains."

On Tuesday, the Financial Times said the bloc planned to announce the probe when US President Joe Biden hosts European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President Charles Michel on October 20.

During trade talks in Beijing last month, China's economy tsar, He Lifeng, asked Valdis Dombrovskis, the EU trade commissioner, to "exercise restraint in the use of trade remedy measures".

The European Commission recently launched an

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## ISRAEL-HAMAS CONFLICT

# 'New cloud' darkening economic outlook: IMF chief

REUTERS, Marrakech, Morocco

International Monetary Fund managing director Kristalina Georgieva said on Thursday the "heartbreaking" Israel-Hamas conflict threatened to darken an already murky global economic outlook.

"We are closely monitoring how the situation evolves, how it is affecting, especially oil markets," Georgieva said. There had been some fluctuations in oil prices and reactions in markets but it was too early to predict the economic impact, she added.

"Very clearly, this is a new cloud on not the safest horizon for the world economy, a new cloud darkening this horizon," she told a news conference at the annual meetings of the IMF and World Bank in Marrakech, Morocco.

Georgieva joined a growing chorus of financial leaders expressing concern about the sudden eruption of violence in the long-running Israeli-Palestinian conflict which has already claimed more than 2,500 lives.

Israel has vowed to annihilate the Hamas movement that rules the Gaza Strip in retribution for the deadliest attack on Jewish civilians since the Holocaust, when hundreds of gunmen

poured across the barrier fence and rampaged through Israeli towns on Saturday.

Israel said on Thursday there would be no humanitarian break to its siege of

the Gaza Strip until all hostages taken by Hamas were freed, after the Red Cross pleaded for fuel to be allowed in to prevent overwhelmed hospitals from "turning into morgues".

"It's heartbreaking to see innocent civilians dying," an emotional Georgieva told reporters. "Who pays the price? It is the innocent who pay the price."

Georgieva said severe shocks were becoming "the new normal" in a global economy characterized by weak growth, economic fragmentation and deepening divergences, with interest rates expected to stay higher for longer to tame persistent inflation.

She appealed to countries to avoid escalating the situation and focus on areas of cooperation. "We do need to build our agility in terms of anticipating shocks and being quick to respond," she said.

French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire told reporters any regional expansion of the conflict would lead to "problematic economic consequences" for energy prices and global growth.



Fuel prices are displayed on a sign at a refuelling station in Miami, Florida. There have been some fluctuations in oil prices in the global market due to the conflict in the Middle East, said a senior official of the IMF.

PHOTO: AFP