Fifty-year-old fisher Jhugal Roy takes his traps to low-lying waterbodies to capture gangetic mud eels called kuchia in Bangla. Roy can earn up to Tk 30,000 per month by selling them to local traders. The picture was taken from Khadaikhira village in Jhalakathi recently.
PHOTO: TITU DAS

Furniture fair begins tomorrow in Ctg

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, *Ctg*

The 13th edition of a furniture fair will begin in the port city on February 6.

Twenty-seven furniture companies, including makers and importers, are likely to take part in the six-day event, said Maksudur Rahman, secretary of the Chattogram chapter of Bangladesh Furniture Industries Owners Association (BFIOA).

Mahabubul Alam, president of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry, is scheduled to inaugurate the event at GEC Convention Hall, he said.

Rahman shared the information at a press conference in the port city yesterday.

Chattogram's furniture industry has the potential to give customers a unique experience, he said.

The event will exhibit the strength of furniture of the port city and customers will get discounts on spot purchase, said Nurul Azom Khan, convenor of the fair's organising committee.

The gates of the fair to be organised by the BFIOA will remain open for the visitors from 10 am to 9 pm.

Dollar jumps

REUTERS, *New York*

The US dollar index jumped to a seven-week high in a broad rally on Friday after data showed that employers added far more jobs in January than expected, reducing the chances of near-term Federal Reserve interest rate cuts.

Nonfarm payrolls increased by 353,000 last month, beating economists' expectations for a gain of 180,000. Average hourly earnings increased 0.6 percent after rising 0.4 percent in December.

It "blew away expectations," said Marc Chandler, chief market strategist at Bannockburn Global Forex in New York. "The market has further cut the chances of a March cut and reduced the amount of cuts (it expects) the Fed will deliver this year."

STOCKS

DSEX ▲	CASPI ▲
1.07%	1.24%
6,280.73	17,844.79

COMMODITIES AS OF FRIDAY

Gold ▼	Oil ▼
$2,039.65 (per ounce)	$72.42 (per barrel)

ASIAN MARKETS FRIDAY CLOSINGS

MUMBAI	TOKYO	SINGAPORE	SHANGHAI
▲ 0.61%	▲ 0.41%	▲ 1.17%	▼ 1.46%
72,085.63	36,158.02	3,179.77	2,730.15

State minister for commerce seeks Chinese investment

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

State Minister for Commerce Ahsanul Islam Titu yesterday sought Chinese investment for import substitution to reduce the big trade gap with China.

Titu said the annual trade gap between Bangladesh and China amounted to more than $22 billion and could not be minimised overnight.

So, he sought Chinese investment in Bangladesh to manufacture products that Bangladesh imports from China. The state minister for commerce also observed that Bangladesh may benefit further from the US-China trade war.

Titu was hopeful the National Board of Revenue (NBR) would reduce the duty on import of some essentials after the commerce ministry sent a letter to the NBR in this regard.

He was also hopeful India would ship the promised 50,000 tonnes of sugar and 20,000 tonnes of onions to Bangladesh before Ramadan.

The state minister was speaking at the Economic Reporters' Forum (ERF) and Bangladesh China Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCCCI) journalism award ceremony held at the Sonargaon Hotel in Dhaka. A total of 17 members of the ERF received awards.

At the event, Yan Hualong, deputy chief of mission of the Chinese embassy in Bangladesh, said Chinese commercial banks may start operations in Bangladesh at the end of the year as trade between the two countries is rising.

Mahbubul Alam, president of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry, also sought Chinese investment in Bangladesh.

BSEC allows raising paid-up capital of Al-Amin Chemical retrospectively

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission (BSEC) has approved retrospectively the raising of Tk 25 crore in paid-up capital by a chemical company although the pooling had effectively breached securities rules for not acquiring the prerequisite regulatory approval.

The approval paves the way for the company to transfer its shares to the SME platform from the over-the-counter market, a move Dhaka Stock Exchange (DSE) had rejected earlier following a probe citing the violation of the rules.

Al-Amin Chemical Industries Limited had applied with the DSE for the transfer on May 31 last year, prompting the initiation of an inspection in August.

According to the DSE inspection report, the company had breached securities rules by raising the Tk 25 crore through the issuance of 2.50 crore ordinary shares at a face value of Tk 10 without the BSEC's consent.

It said four corporate shareholders -- Eshaal Communication, Lava Electrodes, Monarch Express and Monarch Mart -- purchased the shares.

The company had breached securities rules by raising Tk 25 crore through the issuance of 2.50 crore ordinary shares at a face value of Tk 10 without the BSEC's consent

"The corporate shareholders have no visible operation since (they were formed)...It appears that indirectly Md Abul Khayer Hiru and his associates are pulling string from behind," it added.

Md Abul Khayer Hiru is a stock market investor and, according to the report, he and his associates were fined a number of times, the total amount of which stands at Tk 10.89 crore, for manipulating listed shares.

Contacted by The Daily Star yesterday, Md Abul Khayer Hiru said he was not involved with Al-Amin Chemical Industries Limited.

"...Monarch Mart purchased its shares...yes, my family has connection with Monarch Mart, my wife is its managing director but I have no connection," he said following another query.

The report said the inspection was able to deduce that the chemical company would not be able to perform as per a strategic business plan it had submitted earlier.

Following the DSE's rejection, the company had sought the approval retrospectively from the BSEC for the paid-up capital raised.

And in a meeting on December 28 last year, the BSEC gave the approval.

However, this approval was not made public through a press release, as is done in other cases involving the raising of capital.

Toyota to outshine rivals as more consumers opt for hybrids

REUTERS, *Tokyo/San Francisco*

When Tony Le set out with his wife to buy a new car last year, he looked at Tesla and other all-electric models.

In the end, the 37-year-old Modesto, California, tech worker opted for a Toyota RAV4 Hybrid due to worries over getting stranded with a purely electric vehicle, a dead battery and no charging station in sight.

"Sometimes I want to play with the electric vehicles just based on the speed and torque. But for practical use ... it just didn't make sense," said Le, who often drives to Washington state from California for work.

Le is among the growing number of consumers accelerating hybrid vehicle sales, leaving long-time hybrid maker Toyota Motor, in pole position to lap rivals who have been making a rapid transition towards full electrification and now grapple with weakening EV demand.

High interest rates and an uncertain economic outlook have also prompted many EV makers to cut their production targets and warn of slowing sales growth in recent weeks.

Toyota, however, is expected to offer a more upbeat outlook when it reports its earnings on Tuesday, helped by its heavy reliance on hybrids, which accounted for around one third of its total sales of more than 10 million vehicles last year.

"Pretty much every model we sell now is either exclusively hybrid or has a hybrid variant," Greg Davis, general manager of Walser Toyota, a dealership in Minnesota, told Reuters.

He said his outlet is trying to get the number of hybrid vehicles it sells up to 40 percent-50 percent of total sales, as Toyota moves to make its best-selling sedan in the US market, the Camry, available only in a hybrid version.

Toyota has already said the next generation of the Camry will come only as a hybrid, its boldest move yet to push the technology it pioneered with the Prius, introduced more than a quarter century ago.

Despite the near-term sales boost Toyota is expected to report, analysts warn a major risk facing the world's top-selling carmaker is that it remains a laggard in pure battery EVs, which are widely viewed as making up the long-term future of the auto industry.

"Toyota's biggest risk is about consumer adoption of BEVs (battery EVs)," said Stephanie Brinley, an associate director at S&P Global Mobility.

"If consumer adoption of BEVs shifts again and speeds up, Toyota may not be fully ready with competitive BEV solutions." Toyota sold just 104,000 battery EVs last year, less than 1 percent of its total sales, including of its luxury Lexus brand. It plans to boost shipments to 1.5 million EVs by 2026, below Tesla's 2023 shipments of 1.8 million vehicles.

Toyota takes a "multi-pathway" approach to satisfying customer needs in every market, and Chairman Akio Toyoda said last month that battery EVs would reach a market share of 30 percent at most, with hybrids, hydrogen fuel-cell cars and fuel-burning vehicles making up the rest.

US hybrid sales have been rising as consumers balk at high EV prices and are anxious about the range of electric cars, especially in more rural areas, where there could be long distances between charging stations.

Battery EVs are not as widely accepted in the Midwest as they are on the West Coast and other parts of the United States, Davis said.

But demand for hybrids is so strong that buyers have to wait for about a year to get deliveries of some models such as the Toyota Sienna multi-purpose vehicle, and pay full manufacturer-suggested retail prices, he said.

China tech is running to stand still in AI race

REUTERS, *Hong Kong*

China's technology giants are keeping up in artificial intelligence, but they may not be able to maintain their position for much longer. That's exactly the outcome that Washington is looking for.

Tencent's, co-founder and CEO Pony Ma this week declared his company is "not too behind" first tier Western peers despite the United States' intensifying campaign to cut the People's Republic off from high-tech semiconductors, equipment and software. It underscores the notable progress the world's second-largest economy has made in generative AI.

China now has at least 130 large language models - machine-learning models that can recognise, comprehend and generate content using immense data sets - or 40 percent of the global total.

Search engine operator Baidu says the capabilities of its Ernie 4.0 are on par with those of OpenAI's GPT-4, which powers ChatGPT. E-commerce group Alibaba, asserts its Tongyi Qianwen 2.0 has "hundreds of billions" of parameters, making it one of the world's most powerful AI models by that metric.

One explanation is foresight. Chinese firms stockpiled AI chips ahead of tightening US restrictions.

Exports hit record $5.7b in January

FROM PAGE B1

The overall shipment stood at $33.26 billion in July-January, the first seven months of the current financial year, an improvement of 2.52 percent year-on-year, according to the EPB.

Garment shipment increased 3.45 percent to $28.36 billion. Knitwear exports rose 8.15 percent to $16.17 billion and woven sales declined 2.20 percent to $12.18 billion.

The export of agricultural products increased 4.44 percent to $572.72 million.

Cotton waste export rocketed 61.42 percent to $314.57 million while the shipment of non-leather footwear edged up 2.57 percent to $296.24 million.

Leather and leather goods saw their sales decline by 14.33 percent to $628.06 million. Jute and jute goods export fell 6.85 percent to $510.54 million.

The export of home textiles dipped 34.37 percent to $454.74 million.

If the exports and remittances maintain their current momentum, the imports remain in check, and the financial account of the balance of payments sees vast improvement on the back of higher external investments and long-term loans, Bangladesh might finally see an end to a crisis that has been haunting its citizens for the past two years, according to experts.

Govt may review decision on export incentive cuts

FROM PAGE B1

Leaders of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), Bangladesh Textile Mills Association (BTMA) and Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) were present at the meeting.

They also said the move to slash the incentive on garment exports to three major emerging markets, namely Japan, India and Australia, is very discouraging.

Apparel shipments to the three countries reached nearly $2 billion in recent years, they added.

Some 43 sectors are currently eligible for export subsidies, for which the government has spent about Tk 9,025 crore annually for the past three years.

BGMEA President Faruque Hassan said they will review the issue with stakeholders as the garments sector is the country's highest export earner, accounting for 85 percent of its annual receipts.

He also informed that most garment exporters had accepted orders based on the previous incentive package declared at the start of the current fiscal year.

But as the subsidies were changed halfway through, the potential earnings from value addition on those orders will likely decrease.

"So, exporters will not feel encouraged to make garment items from local materials," Hassan added.

BTMA President Mohammad Ali Khokon echoed the same while pointing out that India, China and other countries give cash subsidies to their export-oriented sectors to make them more competitive worldwide.

Khokon also said the government cut the incentives without arranging any alternative with which the country's exports could grow further.

"So, the decision to reduce cash subsidies should be stopped," he said, adding that the next decision in this regard should be taken in consultation with textile millers and garment exporters.

Before meeting with the finance minister, the leaders also held separate meetings with the finance and commerce secretaries to raise their concerns.

The government started gradually withdrawing its cash incentives on exports as such subsidies cannot be provided after Bangladesh graduates to a developing country in 2026.