Star BUSINESS

Competition in the cement industry of Bangladesh could become even narrower as smaller producers are at risk of going out of business

Story on B4

Business leaders call for interest rate ceiling

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The Bangladesh Bank yesterday told businesspeople that the lending rates will not exceed 14 percent, according to the leaders of several trade bodies.

The assurance comes a week after the banking regulator introduced a market-driven interest rate regime prescribed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as part of its conditions for a $4.7 billion loan.

Under the market-driven interest rate regime, banks can fix interest rates based on demand and supply.

"The central bank let us know that interest rates will be decided by market conditions," said Mahbubul Alam, president of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI).

However, the BB assured that the lending rate would not cross 14 percentand it may be even 1 percent less for good borrowers, he added.

Alam made the comments while speaking to reporters after a meeting with Governor Abdur Rouf Talukder at the central bank in Dhaka yesterday.

The FBCCI chief informed that the governor also assured that the business leaders would be able to buy US dollars at Tk 117 per greenback for opening letters of credit.

However, industry people say the governor can give no such assurance under the market-based interest rate regime as some banks have allegedly already hiked their lending rates to more than 14 percent.

Mezbaul Haque, executive director and spokesperson of the BB, told The Daily Star that the governor said there is no justification for the interest rate to go above 14 percent.

"This is because central bank assessments show that the cost of funds is around 6 percent to 7 percent."

Also, Haque believes the exchange rate will not exceed Tk 117 per US dollar as the country will now follow the real effective exchange rate.

"We told the businesspeople to submit a complaint to the central bank if any bank is doing malpractice regarding the fixing of interest rates and exchange rates."

FBCCI President Alam said businesses are suffering financially due to the huge hike in the exchange rate.

The dollar traded at Tk 85 two years ago. Now, the US currency costs as high as Tk 122.

Alam said considering the current global economic situation, they have urged the governor not to raise the interest rate and thereby help maintain the competitiveness of Bangladeshi products.

"If interest rates are increased, the cost of doing business will go up and local industries will suffer. So, a maximum ceiling for the interest rate should be fixed."

SM Mannan, president of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, said he believed the central bank would support the business sector like it did throughout the coronavirus pandemic.

Mohammad Hatem, executive president of the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association, said they also demanded that the existing single borrower exposure limit be raised from 15 percent to 30 percent.

They also recommended the US dollar exchange rate be left to the market, he added.

The FBCCI chief also said the cost of industrial raw materials and components has increased drastically and fuel and transportation costs have gone up.

"Consequently, the cost of production has climbed and the cost of running businesses has surged."

FBCCI calls for…

- Increasing existing single borrower exposure limit from 15% to 30%
- Converting short-term loans into long-term ones to protect manufacturers
- Taking steps so that businesses can open LCs regularly
- Leaving the exchange rate of the dollar on the market
- Not increasing the interest rate

Against this backdrop, businesspeople requested keeping the supply of US dollars in the market as normal as possible for the sake of keeping import activities uninterrupted.

If the exchange rate is left to the market, the supply of US dollars must be normal, they said.

Leaders of the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Bangladesh Textile Mills Association and other trade bodies were also present at the meeting.

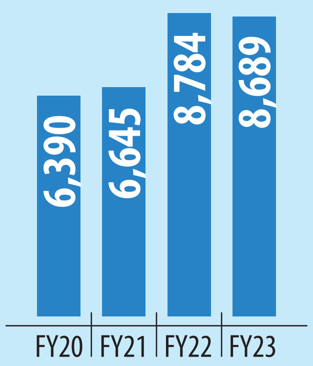
Cash subsidy for exports surges. Only garment yields expected results

BY THE NUMBERS

- Currently, 43 sectors receive govt cash incentive against export receipts
- Maximum rate 15%; minimum 0.5%
- Expenses totalled Tk 8,689cr in FY23

Cash incentive on export earnings

(In crore taka)

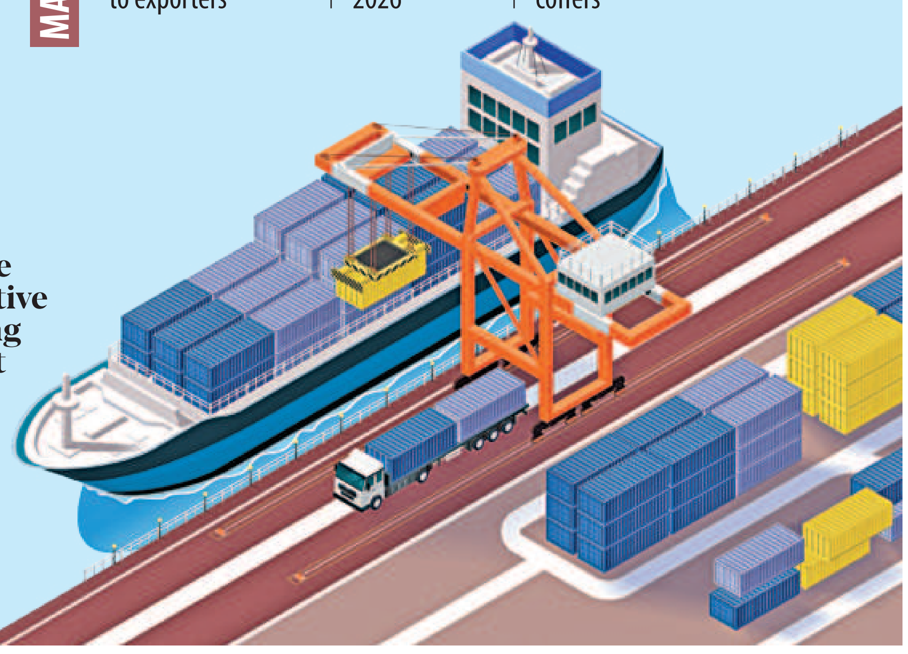


SOURCE: BANGLADESH BANK

MAJOR POINTS

- WTO rules don't allow developing and developed countries to pay direct cash incentive to exporters
- Bangladesh is set to become a developing country in November 2026
- In February, the subsidy for almost all sectors was cut to reduce the pressures on govt coffers

> The way the cash incentive is now being given is not wise
>
> **Zahid Hussain**
> A former lead economist of the World Bank



REFAYET ULLAH MIRDHA

The government's cash incentive against export receipts has soared over the years although many sectors could not make their mark in the global market, bringing in limited results for the government's diversification initiative.

Currently, 43 sectors receive taxpayer-funded cash support, with the maximum rate standing at 15 percent and the minimum rate at 0.5 percent.

Of them, only the garment sector has consistently fared well, turning Bangladesh as the second-largest apparel supplier in the world. The sector accounts for about 85 percent of the country's exports as well.

The government has spent thousands of crores of taka over the years to help exporters become competitive in international trade. The subsidy amount stood at Tk 8,689 crore in the last financial year of 2022-23, slightly down from Tk 8,784 crore from a year prior, Bangladesh Bank data showed.

However, the generous handout can't be continued after 2026 since World Trade Organisation (WTO) rules don't allow developing and developed countries to pay direct cash incentives to exporters. Bangladesh is set to become a developing country in November 2026.

The imminent graduation and persisting pressure on the coffer amid low tax collections prompted the government to cut the subsidy for almost all sectors in February with a view to bringing down the rates gradually and protecting exporters from any shock that may emanate in the event of a sudden withdrawal of the cash aid.

The highest cash incentive rate has been reduced to 15 percent from 20 percent for most sectors. Only four sectors – diversified jute products, vegetables, fruits and products in the agro-processing sector, potatoes, and halal meat and processed meat exporters -- will qualify for the top rate.

Despite immense potential and direct cash assistance, sectors such as jute and jute goods, leather and leather goods, and agro-processing and frozen foods have not been able to emulate the feat achieved by the garment sector.

Even, results are mixed within the garment sector. For example, Bangladesh is still strong in cotton fibre garment items although the world has moved towards non-cotton items. Furthermore, apparel items produced from artificial materials fetch better prices than those made from the natural fibre.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Zahid Hussain, a former lead economist of the World Bank, said the way the cash incentive is now being given is not wise.

"The way should be reconsidered because many sectors could not produce positive outcomes though the money was spent."

If Bangladesh, as a developing nation, provides direct cash incentives on export receipts, disputes regarding compliance will arise, he said.

Hussain said the diversification in the export sector did not take place except in the garment industry despite spending the money. Even corruption took place in the management of cash incentives.

"Therefore, if the incentive is retained for any sectors after the LDC graduation in different forms, the eligibility of sectors should be assessed."

SM Mannan Kochi, president of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, said they had already held meetings with finance ministry officials and called for the continuation of incentives after the LDC graduation since countries such as India and China pay such incentives under different names.

"Many countries are giving the incentive in the name of technology upgradation or skills development funds."

According to the business leader, there are numerous small and medium enterprises and emerging sectors in Bangladesh that are not strong enough financially to cope up with the potential challenges in the post-LDC era.

"The cost of doing business is increasing because of the power tariff hike, so the government should continue the incentive even after the graduation."

Power producers may lose zero-duty benefit

MOHAMMAD SUMAN *and* ASIFUR RAHMAN

Power generation companies, including rental ones, may see an end to a zero-duty benefit on their import of machinery, equipment and spare parts from next fiscal year as the government moves towards generating more revenue curtailing the practice of handing out tax exemptions.

The companies may need to pay a 5 percent customs duty when importing goods from the upcoming fiscal year of 2024-25, according to officials of the National Board of Revenue (NBR).

The rental power plants have been enjoying the duty-free benefit since 2008. Prior to that, there was an import tax of around 10 percent.

The government exempted the rental power companies from paying the duties to enhance private investment in this sector at a time when there was a huge deficit in power production, said the officials concerned.

There were times when Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) had no option but to impose power cuts around the country by rotation for hours on end.

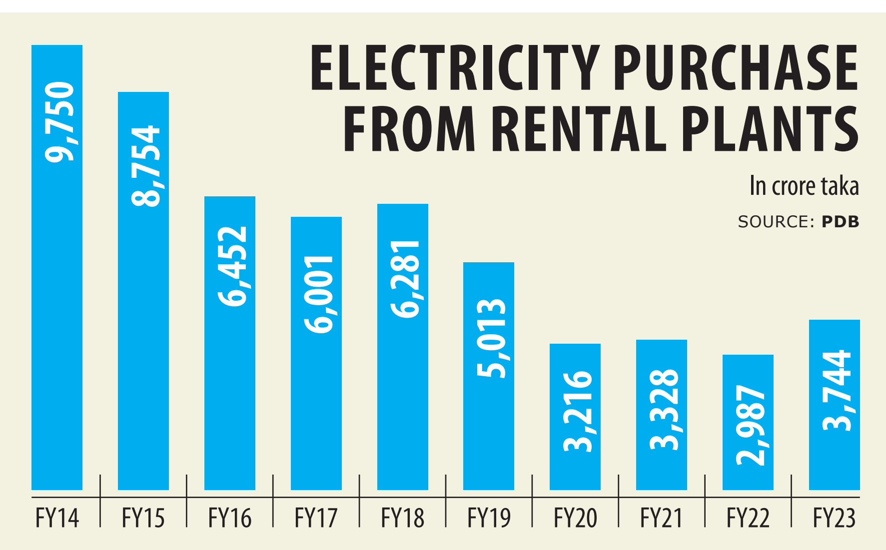
"The government awarded contracts to a good number of small power plants at that time to increase the power generation capacity within a short time," said a BPDB official wishing anonymity.

"But later the validity of contracts with them were extended several times. Besides, they were provided advantages, including different VAT and tax exemptions," said the official.

ELECTRICITY PURCHASE FROM RENTAL PLANTS

In crore taka

SOURCE: PDB



According to a private sector power generation policy (PSPGP) of Bangladesh 2004, private investors enjoy a corporate income tax waiver, relaxed customs duties, exemptions from stamp duty payments and interest on foreign loans and other benefits.

Such decisions were changed and extended several times.

About the customs duty, a government circular of March 11, 2008 reads that rental power companies have been exempted from paying all kinds of import duties, value added taxes and supplementary duties.

This was applicable whenever equipment or spare parts were being imported for power plants being set up temporarily.

There were some conditions in the circular, including one that stipulated that rental companies would have to export their plants and parts after the end of the contracts.

But later, most of the plants got extensions on the durations of their contracts. The validity of the circular was also extended multiple times, the last being till June 2026.

The new proposal for imposing the 5 percent customs duty comes at a time when the government is facing pressure from the civil society to stop availing power from the rental plants for it being more expensive than that from other sources.

The other sources are government-run power plants and independent power producers, which have a much larger power generation capacity than the rental ones.

On the other hand, the NBR is also seeking ways to enhance revenue collection in order to finance public expenditure and reduce government dependence on borrowing.

"We are working to place the proposals as duty measures for the next fiscal year with the objective of coming out of the culture of giving out tax breaks," said a senior official of the NBR, seeking anonymity.

"A 5 percent customs duty will be applicable on all types of equipment required for setting up any power plant," said the source in the NBR.

According to the NBR's data, investors in this sector have received duty exemptions amounting to Tk 1,853 crore in the last two years from July 2022 to March 2024.

There were at least 32 rental power plants operating in fiscal year 2015-16.

Now there are 18 with a combined capacity of 1,170MW. Of it, 797MW is being availed on a "No Electricity No Payment" basis following renewals of associated contracts, said the BPDB officials.

Amnesty to black money in EZs, hi-tech park may go

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

An amnesty provided to black money invested in economic zones and hi-tech parks is unlikely to be continued from the next fiscal year of 2024-25 as per plans of the National Board of Revenue (NBR).

Currently the tax authority does not raise questions about the source of investment if any person invests undisclosed wealth in the construction of factories inside economic zones and high-tech parks and pays a 10 percent tax on the invested amount.

The amnesty was available since the first day of July 2019 and is to last till June 30, 2024, said the NBR in an income tax law 2023.

"As the benefit is going to expire next month, we are not considering extending it further," said a senior official of the NBR.

Bangladesh began establishing economic zones under public and private arrangements over a decade ago to encourage investment, create jobs and enable organised industrialisation.

The authorities of the industrial enclaves offered land, utility services and other investment-related services to encourage investment.

Currently, the public and private sectors are operating 11 economic zones.

Around $4.78 billion has been invested in the economic zones as of June 2023, according to Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority.

Besides, 11 hi-tech parks are in operation where Bangladesh Hi-Tech Park Authority (BHTPA) has allotted land and space to 230 firms.

It has given co-working space rent free to 151 startups. The investment in the parks contributed to the creation of 28,000 jobs, said the BHPTA.

READ MORE ON B3

Islami Bank, Mastercard name winners of remittance campaign

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Islami Bank Bangladesh and Transfast, a remittance brand of Mastercard, declared the winners of the "Transfast-Islami Bank Remittance Campaign" yesterday.

Monzal, a client of an agent outlet under Kapasia branch in Gazipur, won the mega prize of a 1,500cc private car, said a press release.

Indraneel Ganguly, assistant corporate treasurer of the global digital payment provider, and Mohammed Monirul Moula, managing director of the bank, handed over the keys to the winner at the Pan Pacific Sonargaon Dhaka.

They also handed over prize money of Tk 1 lakh each among 30 more winners, who were selected through a digital draw on every banking day from March 12 to April 30, 2024.

"We are thrilled to see the positive impact of our remittance campaign. As a result of this two-month-long campaign, there has been a huge enthusiasm among the expatriates to send remittances through legal channels," said Moula.

"Wage earners' remittance is very important for Bangladesh's economy, and this campaign is a humble step towards bringing more remittance to Bangladesh," said Syed Mohammad Kamal, country manager of Bangladesh at Mastercard.

Muhammad Qaisar Ali, JQM Habibullah and Altaf Hossain, additional managing directors of the bank, were present as special guests.

Mohammed Monirul Moula, managing director of Islami Bank Bangladesh, and Indraneel Ganguly, assistant corporate treasurer of Mastercard, pose for photographs with award recipients of the "Transfast-Islami Bank Remittance Campaign" at the Pan Pacific Sonargaon Dhaka yesterday.

PHOTO: MASTERHEAD PR

ICAB, BPPA strike MoU on document verification system

STAR BUSINESS DESK

The Institute of Chartered Accountants of Bangladesh (ICAB) yesterday signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Bangladesh Public Procurement Authority (BPPA), enabling financial discipline in the public procurement system of the country.

Md Shohelur Rahman Chowdhury, chief executive officer of BPPA, and Shubhashish Bose, chief executive officer of ICAB, penned the MoU at the CA Bhaban in Karwan Bazar, said a press release.

Under this MoU, ICAB will provide necessary assistance in verifying the authenticity of audited financial reports filed in the e-GP system for compliance with the rules and regulations of PPA-2006 and PPR-2008.

BPPA will use this Document Verification System (DVS) to verify whether the audit report and audited financial statements submitted by the registered tenderers/suppliers in the e-GP system have been certified by ICAB's CoP holder chartered accountants.

Electro Mart launches Eid-ul-Azha campaign

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Electro Mart has launched a monthlong promotional programme for its Konka and Haiko brand electronics ahead of Eid-ul-Azha.

Md Nurul Afser, deputy managing director of Electro Mart, inaugurated the campaign.

"Brand Konka has become a symbol of trust and confidence for customers in the country for more than two decades. Now, its electronics and home appliances are available in every home in remote areas of the country," Afser said.

He informed that Gree refrigerators and freezers, Konka ice-cream freezers, showcase freezers, no-frost refrigerators and freezers will soon be introduced to the market.

Retail customers will get a scratch card on purchase of Konka and Haiko brand refrigerators, LED TVs, microwave ovens and washing machines during this campaign.

They have chances to win numerous prizes, including gold ornaments, Konka LED TVs and many more gifts. There are special discounts for partners and dealers on total withdrawals and foreign travel opportunities, according to a press release.

Every product of Konka electronics is domestic, eco-friendly, easy to use, affordable and designed to suit the needs and mindset of the customers and manufactured using the latest technology in the world.

PHOTO: ELECTRO MART

Md Nurul Afser, deputy managing director of Electro Mart, Mohammad Sazzed-Un-Newaz and Nurul Azim Sunny, directors, attend the launch of a promotional campaign for the company's Konka and Haiko brand electronics ahead of Eid-ul-Azha.

PRICES OF KEY ESSENTIALS IN DHAKA CITY

	PRICE (MAY 16, 2024)	% CHANGES FROM A MONTH AGO	% CHANGE FROM A YEAR AGO
Fine rice (kg)	Tk 60-Tk 76	-3.55 ↓	.74 ↑
Coarse rice (kg)	Tk 50-Tk 54	1.96 ↑	8.33 ↑
Loose flour (kg)	Tk 35-Tk 45	-15.79 ↓	-30.43 ↓
Lentil (kg)	Tk 105-Tk 110	0	13.16 ↑
Soybean (litre)	Tk 145-Tk 155	1.69 ↑	-17.81 ↓
Potato (kg)	Tk 48-Tk 55	8.42 ↑	37.33 ↑
Onion (kg)	Tk 65-Tk 75	16.67 ↑	3.70 ↑
Egg (4 pcs)	Tk 48-Tk 50	25.64 ↑	1.03 ↑

SOURCE: TCB

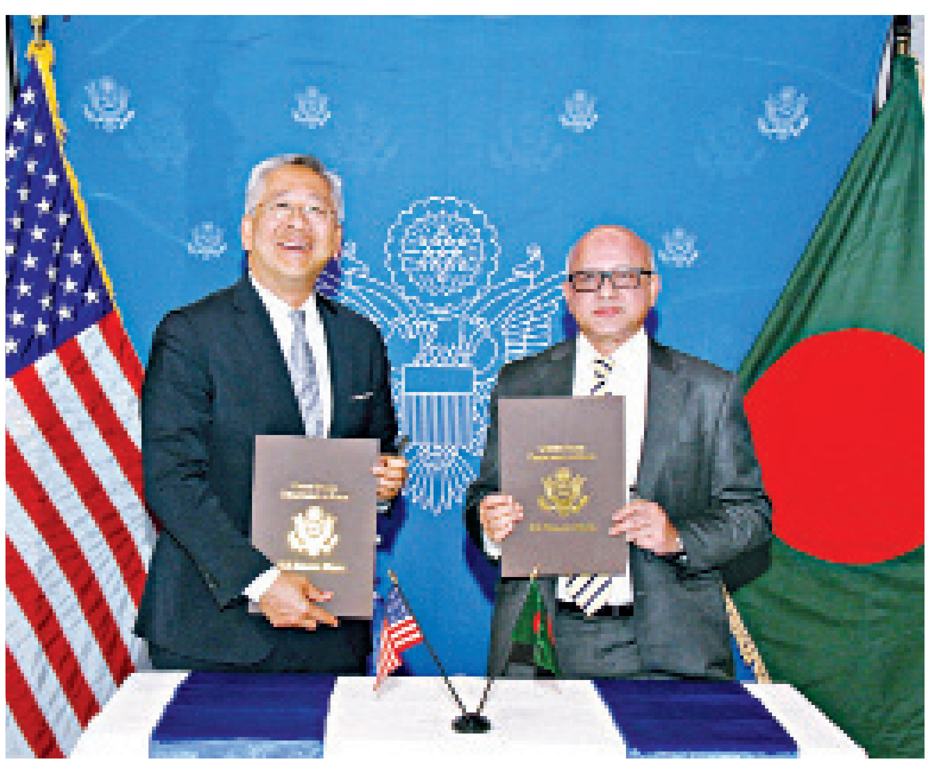


PHOTO: EASTERN BANK

US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu and Acting Managing Director of Eastern Bank Ahmed Shaheen pose for photographs after signing an agreement on the "EBL Climate Change Adaptation Award" at the EMK Centre in the city's Gulshan on Wednesday.

Japan economy suffers worse-than-expected contraction

AFP, *Tokyo*

Japan's economy suffered a worse-than-expected contraction in the first quarter, official data showed Thursday, in further bad news for its unpopular government.

Gross domestic product in the world's number four economy shrank by 0.5 percent against market expectations of a drop of only 0.3 percent.

Exports dived 5.0 percent, after growing 2.8 percent the previous quarter, while imports fell 3.4 percent.

Compared with the first quarter of 2023, GDP fell an annualised 2.0 percent compared with a forecasted drop of 1.2 percent, according to Bloomberg News.

The economy was hit by a major earthquake on January 1 on the Noto peninsula and by halts in production at auto giant Toyota's Daihatsu subsidiary.

Japan has been flirting with recession since last year, with zero growth -- revised Thursday from an expansion of 0.1 percent -- between October and December.

In the previous quarter, from July to September, GDP suffered a major contraction of 0.9 percent, also revised on Thursday from an earlier reading of minus 0.8 percent.

Exports dived 5.0 percent, after growing 2.8 percent the previous quarter, while imports fell 3.4 percent

The new data will add to pressure on Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and his government, which for months has seen poor poll ratings.

Germany replaced Japan as the number three economy in 2023 -- in large part because of the weak yen -- and is projected to be overtaken by India too.

For decades, Japan has battled stagnant growth and deflation as well as a rapidly ageing population.

Inflation, however, has picked up, allowing the Bank of Japan in March to call time on its maverick monetary policy and raise interest rates for the first time in 17 years.

Rates elsewhere remain higher however and the wide differential has added to pressure on the yen, which in recent weeks has hit three-decade lows against the dollar.

In late April and early May, the yen briefly rose sharply against the greenback, prompting speculation that Japan had intervened in the market.

Japan's currency was once regarded as a safe haven, expected to rise in value in times of global turmoil.

But that has not proved true in recent years, with the yen cratering from around 115 per dollar before Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine to 160 last month.

A weaker yen is good for Japanese exporters and foreign visitors, but it makes imports and foreign travel for outbound tourists more expensive.

"The BOJ can't ignore these GDP numbers. This is not at all the kind of situation where they can raise interest rates again right away," said Nobuyasu Atago, chief economist at Rakuten Securities Economic Research Institute, quoted by Bloomberg.

"I don't think they can move in July. They will have to wait for second quarter GDP data to come out in August."

Gold near one-month high

REUTERS

Gold prices hovered near a one-month high on Thursday as signs of inflation stabilizing in the US increased the likelihood of rate cuts by the Federal Reserve as early as September.

Spot gold was little changed at $2,383.86 per ounce as of 0927 GMT, after hitting its highest since April 19 earlier in the session. Bullion rose over 1 percent on Wednesday.

On the other hand, US gold futures slipped 0.3 percent to $2,388.40.

"The combination of stabilizing inflation and softness in other economic data such as retail sales is really a good cocktail for gold and silver," said Ole Hansen, head of commodity strategy at Saxo Bank.

National Bank's losses jump 145% in Q1

FEDA AL HOSSAIN

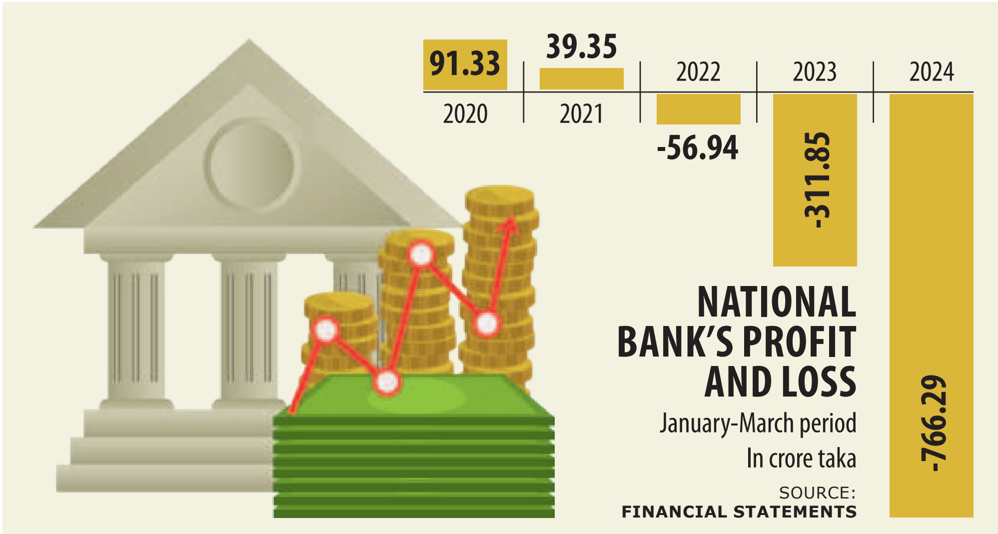
Crisis-ridden National Bank's financial woes have deepened further, as the bank's losses increased by a massive 145 percent year-on-year in the first quarter of 2024.

The loss amounted to Tk 766.29 crore.

National Bank's financials in the January-March period paint a grim picture, with the losses growing more than 13 times over the past three years.

The bank reported a loss of Tk 311.85 crore in the first three months of 2023 and another loss of Tk 56.94 crore in the corresponding period of 2022.

In a statement published on the Dhaka Stock Exchange website yesterday, the bank disclosed its consolidated loss per share to be Tk 2.38, up from Tk 0.97 in the corresponding period last year.



During the period, the bank could not book interest on loans due to non-recovery from defaulters, the lender said

"During the period, the bank could not book interest on loans due to non-recovery from defaulters," said National Bank.

The bank also said it incurred higher interest expenses on deposits and borrowings.

National Bank's consolidated net asset value (NAV) per share tumbled to Tk 4.92 in the first three months of this year from Tk 11.92 in the corresponding period of last year, as per its unaudited financial statements.

The bank attributed an operating loss to the significant decrease in its NAV.

"Nevertheless, the new board and the new management are exerting maximum efforts to improve the financial health of the bank by streamlining recovery drives and mobilisation of low-cost deposits," added National Bank.

National Bank is the first fully-owned private bank in Bangladesh that began its journey in 1983. It flourished as one of the largest and most prominent private lenders in Bangladesh

However, its financial health started deteriorating after 2009 when Sikder Group took control.

In 2022 and 2023, the bank suffered a combined loss of Tk 4,758 crore, with a high amount of classified loans regarded as one of the factors behind the abysmal performance.

Default loans of National Bank accounted for 25 percent of the loans it had disbursed at the end of 2022.

Its classified loans stood at Tk 6,658 crore in 2022, accounting for 15.76 percent of the total loans and advances of the bank.

The prospect of a merger between National Bank and United Commercial Bank sparked panic among customers about the bank's financial stability, leading to a significant withdrawal of deposits recently.

On May 6, Bangladesh Bank dissolved the National Bank's board of directors, with Parveen Haque Sikder losing the post of director.

The restructuring came after the now-defunct board split over the bank's merger with United Commercial Bank. Three independent directors, including the National Bank chairman, resigned over the issue.

Bangladesh could earn billions from carbon trade: experts

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Bangladesh could earn a few billion US dollars from global carbon trading each year if carbon reduction projects are properly implemented in the country, according to speakers at a discussion.

The global carbon trading market was worth $4.5 trillion in 2022 and may reach $8.98 trillion by 2050, they said.

However, Bangladesh is not ready to tap into this market as it lacks the adequate information, legal framework and expertise required from both the public and private sectors, they added.

Carbon trade is the buying and selling of credits that permit a company or other entity to emit a certain amount of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases.

In case a company or entity does not need their excess credits, then they can sell it to another company or entity for actual money.

Each carbon credit is measured as 1 tonne of carbon dioxide, with the International Monetary Fund having proposed an average price of $75 per unit.

However, the unit price varies in different parts of the world depending on the demand.

So far, Bangladesh has only earned a few hundred million US dollars from carbon markets.

But as the country is one of the lowest carbon emitters in the world, accounting for only 0.5 percent of global emissions, it has the potential to earn significantly more.

In a presentation, Eun Joo Allison Yi, senior environment specialist of the World Bank, called for strengthening environmental governance and accounting systems.

Additionally, YI stressed the need for enabling energy independence through energy efficiency and trade in renewable energy, and to promote inclusive connectivity through green transport and logistic systems.

She also suggested investing in new green industries and human capital to promote job creation and green innovation, fostering liveable green cities through urban regeneration and building new smart cities.

Yi was speaking as a panellist at a discussion on the "Application of Carbon Financing: Challenges and Policy Options for Bangladesh" at the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) in Dhaka yesterday.

Shams Mahmud, director of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, said garment factories can be run with green energy but fabric production requires fossil fuel.

He said many special economic zones (SEZs) are not yet ready for industrial units even though the central bank already said the setting up of new industries will not be allowed outside of SEZs.

State Minister for Finance Waseqa Ayesha Khan said the government aims to meet 40 percent of the country's energy requirement from renewable sources by 2041.

Mahfuz Kabir, research director of the BIISS, presented the keynote paper, titled "Pathways of Carbon Financing: Imperatives for Bangladesh".

In his presentation, Kabir said the existing buyers of carbon credits include Microsoft, Shell, BP, Nestle, Amazon, Delta Airlines, United Airlines, Coca-Cola, JP Morgan, and Goldman Sachs.

Some countries that buy carbon credits include Canada, the US, China, South Korea, New Zealand, Kazakhstan, the UK, Norway, Sweden, Spain, Portugal, France, Ireland, Italy, Greece and Iceland.

Besides, garment exporters in Bangladesh are also potential buyers of carbon credits, he added.

Oil prices steady

REUTERS, *London*

Brent oil futures held steady on Thursday, bolstered by signs of stronger demand in the US after slower than expected inflation in April and lower oil stocks in the past week.

Brent crude futures fell 25 cents, or 0.3 percent, to $82.50 a barrel by 0951 GMT. US West Texas Intermediate crude (WTI) shed 26 cents, or 0.33 percent, to $78.37.

Brent had touched an intra-day low of $81.05 on Wednesday - the lowest the front-month futures contract has traded since February 26 - but recovered to about 0.5 percent higher on the day.

Honda doubling investment in EVs

AFP, *Tokyo*

Honda announced plans Thursday to double investment in electric vehicles to $65 billion by 2030 as the Japanese auto giant seeks to go fully electric.

The company is aggressively pursuing a target set three years ago of achieving 100 percent EV sales by 2040.

In April, it announced the largest auto investment in Canada's history with a new US$11 billion EV battery and vehicle assembly plant.

The company also has a partnership in EVs with Sony, and is exploring collaboration with rival Nissan as they face a "once-in-a-century" upheaval in the car industry.

Analysts have said the move is aimed at catching up with Chinese EV competitors as Beijing-backed automakers such as BYD speed ahead of global rivals.

"Honda is planning to invest approximately 10 trillion yen in resources... through 2030, when the period of full-fledged popularisation of EVs is expected to start," a statement said.

The automaker had previously allocated five trillion yen to EV tech in the medium-term.

Honda wants to "establish a competitive business structure with an aim to reduce overall production cost by approximately 35 percent", it said Thursday.

And "as of 2030, Honda will reduce the cost of the battery to be procured in North America by more than 20 percent compared to the cost of current batteries".

By 2030 the company is aiming for electric vehicles and fuel-cell EVs to account for 40 percent of global sales.

The world's auto giants are increasingly prioritising electric and hybrid vehicles, with demand growing for less polluting models as concern about climate change grows.

At the same time, however, there has been a slowdown in the EV market on the back of consumer concern about high prices, reliability, range and a lack of charging points.

China overtook Japan as the world's biggest vehicle exporter in 2023, helped by its dominance in electric cars.

When Honda released its earnings last week, it said it expected overall vehicle sales in the United States and Japan to grow this financial year, but predicted sales in the rest of Asia would ease.

Honda plans to produce around two million EVs per year by 2030.

US consumer inflation eases slightly in Apr

AFP, *Washington*

US consumer inflation eased slightly last month, according to government data published Wednesday, in a positive sign for President Joe Biden ahead of November's election.

The data supports his administration's messaging that the US economy has turned a corner, as it looks to quell consumers' concerns about the impact of rising prices going into an expected rematch against former president Donald Trump.

US stock markets set new records in New York following the publication of the inflation data, as hopes rose that the Federal Reserve would start cutting interest rates in the coming months.

The annual consumer price index (CPI) came in at 3.4 percent in April, down 0.1 percentage point from March, the Labor Department said in a statement.

This was in line with the median forecast of economists surveyed by Dow Jones Newswires and the Wall Street Journal. Monthly inflation came in at 0.3 percent, slightly below expectations.

"I know many families are struggling, and that even though we've made progress we have a lot more to do," Biden said in a statement, adding: "Prices are still too high."

But Trump, his likely Republican opponent, said in a statement that American workers and families were "literally paying the price for Joe Biden's failed economic policies, with prices on household essentials like gas, food, rent and diapers skyrocketing."

Amnesty

FROM PAGE B1

Apart from the amnesty's discontinuation, the NBR may bring changes in a provision in the law that enables undeclared income to be legalised when invested in buildings and flats, according to the NBR.

As per the income tax law, any such investment "will be considered as ones which have already gone through the process of their source being explained" with field officials of the tax administration if a specified amount of tax is paid per square metre area of flats or buildings.

The rate of taxes varies depending on the location of the flats or buildings.

Jamuna Bank's Q1 profit up 23%

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Jamuna Bank has secured a 23 percent year-on-year rise in profit in the first three months of this year thanks to an increase in incomes from net interest, investment and commission.

In unaudited quarterly financial statements released recently, the bank reported a profit of Tk 164.23 crore for the January-March period, up from Tk 133.62 crore in the same quarter of last year.

This resulted in consolidated earnings per share of Tk 2.02 in the first quarter of 2024, up from Tk 1.64 in the first three months of 2023.

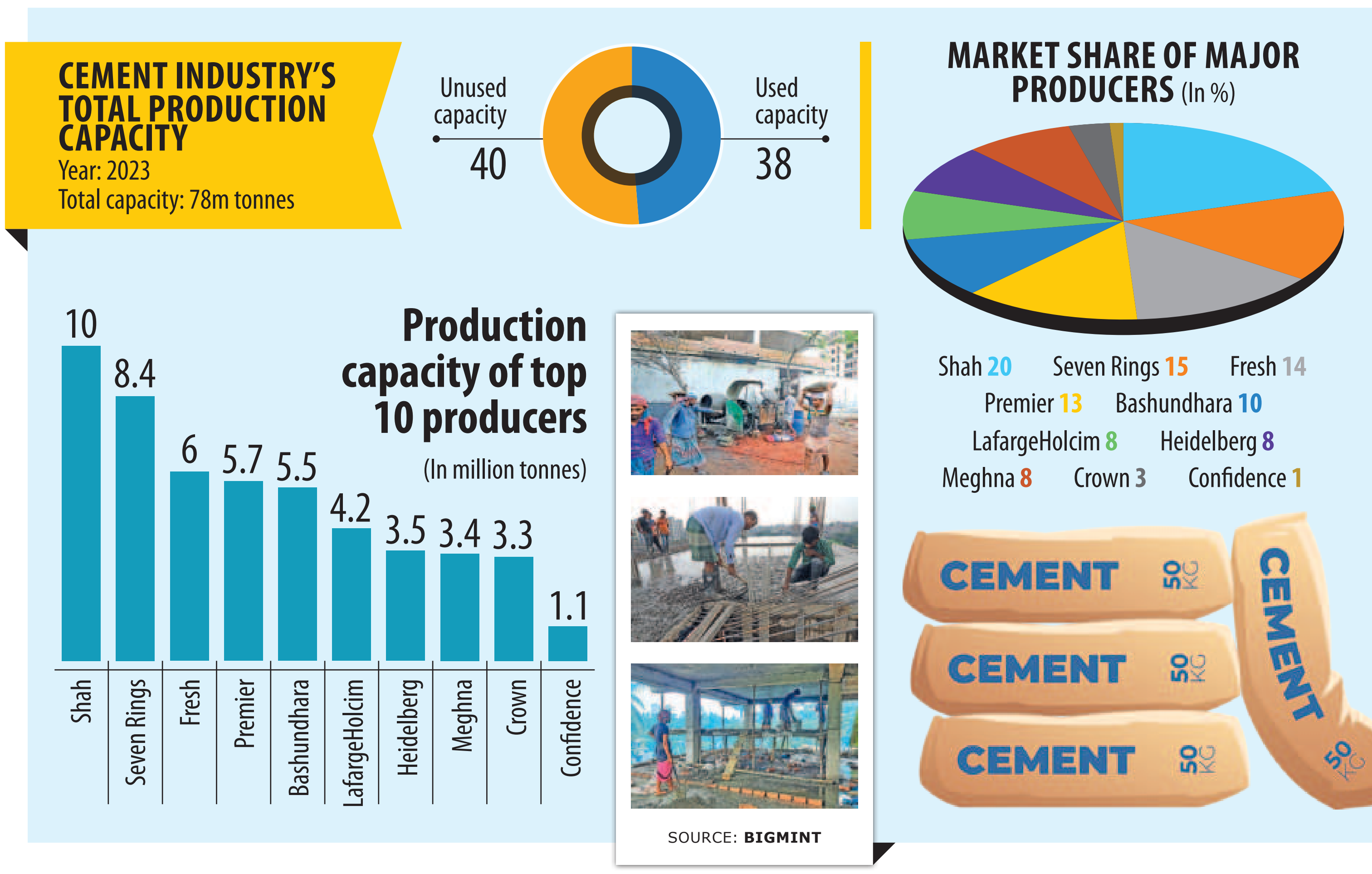
Similarly, the bank's net operating cash flow per share hit Tk 31.32 in January-March of 2024, up from Tk 24.28 in the same period previous year thanks to an increase in operational activities and deposits.

The bank also said its net asset value had increased for the growth of retained earnings.

In another development, the board of directors of Jamuna Bank has decided to issue "Jamuna Bank Short Note", a non-convertible, redeemable, unsecured and tradable short-term bond with maturities of 91 days, 182 days and 364 days.

Too much of cement: production outstrips annual demand

Small producers may go out of business for overcapacity, high input costs



JAGARAN CHAKMA

Competition in the cement industry of Bangladesh could become even narrower as smaller producers are at risk of going out of business due to overcapacity in production and increasingly higher input costs.

Local cement makers collectively churn out about 78 million tonnes of the construction material each year, exceeding the country's annual requirement by some 105 percent.

This data was released by Bigmint, an Indian platform for commodity price reporting, market intelligence and consulting, during the 4th Bangladesh International Trade Summit 2024.

The two-day event jointly organised by Ahmed Enterprise and Bigmint came to a close at the Pan Pacific Sonargaon Dhaka in the capital on Wednesday.

The data showed that four major producers, namely Shah Cement, Seven Rings Cement, Fresh Cement and Premier Cement, control 62 percent of the total market.

But with around 30 cement factories active across the country, the overall industry is in trouble because of higher production costs resulting from the ongoing US dollar crunch, said Shankar Kumar Roy, executive director of the Bangladesh Cement Manufacturers Association.

Besides, cement makers are facing difficulties in opening letters of credit (LCs) to import raw materials as banks are being uncooperative amid the forex crisis.

Regarding the overcapacity issue, Roy said many people invest in such industries without doing proper market research when they see there is scope to profit.

For this reason, smaller producers may face unhealthy competition and be forced out of the market.

Roy informed that the domestic cement industry is fully import based as none of the required raw materials, such as clinker and limestone, are readily available in the country.

As such, the cost of producing cement depends on raw material prices in the international market.

> **Local cement makers collectively churn out about 78 million tonnes of the construction material each year, exceeding the country's annual requirement by some 105 percent**

For example, the price of clinker is now $45 per tonne while it was $41 in 2022.

Also, the situation has only worsened due to the devaluation of the local currency against the US dollar, with importers now paying Tk 122 per greenback for opening LCs while it was Tk 118 previously.

As a result, the price of a 50-kilogramme bag of cement has increased by Tk 60 to Tk 50 over the past year. Still though, the higher prices are not making up for the increased production cost as there is no scope to pass the burden onto consumers, Roy said.

Bangladesh mainly imports cement raw materials from Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, Pakistan, India, the UAE, Oman, Saudi Arabia and Japan.

On the other hand, Mohammed Amirul Haque, managing director of Premier Cement Mills, does not see overcapacity as a burden for the industry as he anticipates further growth in demand for the country's continued urbanisation.

Against this backdrop, he said the manufacturers established their units with this target in mind.

Haque also said that rather than the overcapacity issue, the lack of proper market projections, gas and power supply are bigger concerns for the industry.

"So, there is nothing to be worried about regarding the overcapacity," he added while pointing out that the industry's excess production capacity can be better utilised in the future.

So, there is nothing to be worried about the over capacity of the cement industry, Haque said.

Md Jahangir Alam, vice-chancellor of the Rajshahi University of Engineering and Technology, said the cement industry is health hazardous and also pollutes the environment.

So, he emphasised on improving waste management at cement factories in industrial areas.

Alam also suggested using river routes to carry cement to save the environment and stressed the need for installing water purification systems to avoid river pollution in the process.

He also said the manufacturers should collect their required raw materials from neighbouring countries to keep costs lower and thereby ensure business sustainability.

Merging minds with machines

MAHTAB UDDIN AHMED

With the news of brain chip implants, our friends joked that advertisers would run commercials in our brains if we got chips without a subscription. For advertisers, it would be the best way to reach consumers. Researchers would get the most accurate data ever. Taxmen would know who is even considering dodging taxes or sending money outside Bangladesh. Different subscription levels would offer different security and safety features, like blocking data access to wives, boyfriends, and taxmen.

Any of you who thought it to be some unrealistic joke has more surprises ahead. As we grapple with AI (artificial intelligence), new advancements, like Neuralink's brain chip, bring even more excitement and debate.

Founded by Elon Musk, Neuralink is leading the way in merging human brains with AI. This brain chip could revolutionise medicine, communication, and our understanding of human consciousness, marking a huge leap into the future.

Neuralink's core mission is to develop ultra-high bandwidth brain-machine interfaces (BMIs) to connect humans and computers. This ambitious goal aims to address various neurological conditions, enhance human cognitive abilities, and eventually enable direct communication between brains and machines.

Imagine a world where paralysis is no longer a life sentence; memories can be stored and replayed like digital files, and complex thoughts can be instantly shared without words. Brain chip developers seek to realise this vision, positioning themselves at the cutting edge of neurotechnology.

At the heart of Neuralink's innovation is a tiny, implantable brain chip called the "Link." This device, about the size of a coin, is designed to be surgically inserted into the skull, where it can interface directly with the brain. The Link features thousands of ultra-fine electrodes that penetrate the brain's outer layers, capable of detecting and transmitting neural signals.

Neuralink has made significant strides in both animal and human experiments. As of early 2024, it successfully implanted its first brain chip in a human subject as part of its prime study, which aims to help paralysed people control external devices using their thoughts. The human subject/patient is reportedly recovering well.

Earlier, it achieved a significant milestone by enabling a monkey named Pager to play the video game Pong using only its mind.

Brain chip developers are in the early stages of testing the technology, with commercial operations expected to be still some years away. The company received FDA approval in May 2023 to begin human trials. These trials currently focus on helping paralytic people control external devices like computers and phones by using their thoughts.

Several companies and research institutions are advancing brain-computer interface (BCI) technology similar to Neuralink's. Notable competitors include Synchron, Blackrock Neurotech and Kernel. Paradromics works on high-bandwidth BCIs to restore communication in individuals with severe neurological conditions.

While such groundbreaking developments are exciting, they are making most of us nervous, if not scared. Potential unethical uses of brain chip technology include significant privacy violations, as unauthorised access to private thoughts and memories could occur.

There are concerns over unauthorised mind control and manipulation to influence or alter individuals' behaviours and perceptions. Governments could exploit brain chips for tracking and influencing public thoughts and mass surveillance.

The technology could also aggravate social inequalities, providing cognitive enhancements only to those who can afford them, leading to new forms of discrimination. Additionally, ethical dilemmas arise regarding informed consent, especially when used on vulnerable populations like children or those with cognitive impairments.

Elon Musk's portfolio of companies—Tesla, SpaceX, Starlink, X (former Twitter), OpenAI, and Neuralink—collectively represent a formidable convergence of cutting-edge technologies that have the potential to profoundly reshape various aspects of society.

While each innovation is groundbreaking on its own, their combined impact raises both exciting possibilities and significant ethical concerns. The next superpower is anybody's guess now.

The author is founder and managing director of BuildCon Consultancies Ltd.

Dhaka Bank's Q1 profit highest in 4 years

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Dhaka Bank attained a 26 percent year-on-year rise in profit in the first quarter of this year amounting to Tk 76.5 crore, the highest in four years, attributing it to an increase in operating profit.

The commercial private lender made a profit of Tk 60.39 crore in the corresponding period of last year.

The bank's earnings per share hit Tk 0.76 in the January-March period of 2024, up from Tk 0.6 in the same period previous year, according to unaudited financial statements released recently.

However, its net operating cash flow per share stood at Tk 7.5 in the negative in this year's first three months, which was Tk 7.74 in the same period in 2023.

Rising disbursements of loans and declining deposits led to this fall, said the bank in a disclosure.

Dhaka Bank began its commercial operation in 1995 with an authorised capital of Tk 100 crore and a paid-up capital of Tk 10 crore.

The bank has 114 branches, including two Islamic banking ones, two offshore banking units, three SME service centres, 26 sub-branches and 87 ATMs across the country.

As US hikes China tariffs, imports soar from Vietnam

REUTERS, *Hanoi*

As the United States intensifies efforts to reduce trade with China by hiking tariffs, it has greatly boosted imports from Vietnam, which relies on Chinese input for much of its exports, data show.

The surge in the China-Vietnam-US trade has vastly widened trade imbalances, with the Southeast Asian country last year posting a surplus with Washington close to $105 billion - 2.5 times bigger than in 2018 when the Trump administration first put heavy tariffs on Chinese goods.

Vietnam now has the fourth-highest trade surplus with the United States, lower only than China, Mexico and the European Union.

The increasingly symbiotic relationship emerges from trade, customs and investment data reviewed by Reuters from the United Nations, the US, Vietnam and China, and is confirmed by preliminary estimates from the World Bank and half a dozen economists and supply chains experts.

It shows that Vietnam's export boom has been fuelled by imports from neighbouring China, with inflows from China almost exactly matching the value and swings of exports to the United States in recent years.

In preliminary estimates shared with Reuters, the World Bank reckons a 96 percent correlation between the two flows, up from 84 percent before Donald Trump's presidency.

'What doesn't kill you makes you stronger,' China trolls new US tariffs

REUTERS, *Beijing*

China's measured response to the US move to hike tariffs on $18 billion of Chinese goods from syringes to batteries suggests relations between the world's two largest economies face more frost rather than a fresh firefight over trade.

China denounced the Biden administration's action and vowed "resolute measures" to protect its interests.

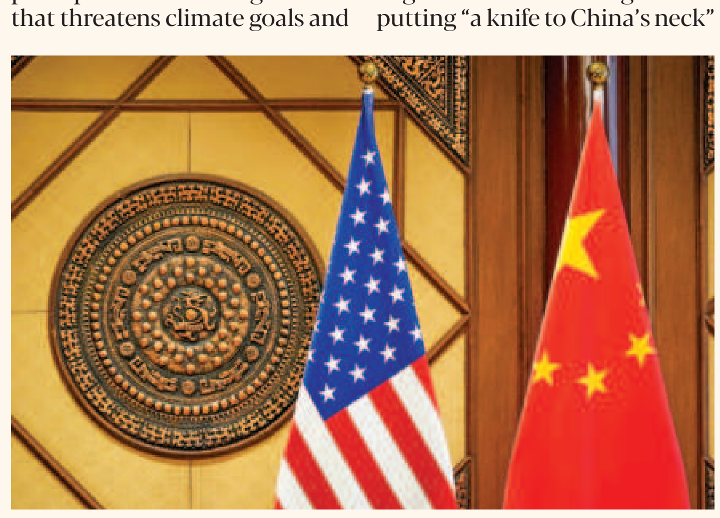
But Beijing's response also suggests a new dynamic - and confidence - compared with 2018 when Trump-era tariffs on $300 billion of Chinese goods touched off an escalating trade war, analysts said.

Among the differences between then and now: the Biden White House flagged potential measures to Chinese officials in advance and the tariffs target industries, including EVs and batteries, where the economic impact is limited and Chinese companies' dominance appears unassailable.

In response to the tariffs, Chinese state media have shot back, accusing the United States of subverting its own free trade principles and taking action that threatens climate goals and will push up costs for American consumers.

In essence, the argument goes, you are hurting yourself.

That marks a break from the tone in 2018, when a Chinese negotiator said Washington was putting "a knife to China's neck" and state media had suggested extreme counter-measures like a boycott of US food imports or a sell-off of US bonds.



US and Chinese flags are seen during an event at Diaoyutai State Guesthouse in Beijing.

PHOTO: AFP/FILE

"China can take the moral high ground," said Wang Huiyao, founder and president of the Beijing-based Center for China and Globalization, a think tank. "It doesn't play around with those who break international standards and norms."

In the starkest language of its response, the Chinese commerce ministry said the White House had broken the spirit of an agreement to steady bilateral relations reached by Chinese President Xi Jinping and US President Joe Biden late last year in San Francisco.

Biden has said he wants to win this era of competition with China but not to launch a trade war, and US officials have looked to engage Beijing on limited areas of cooperation, including climate change.

China has time to punch back with targeted actions of its own before the tariffs go into effect, analysts said. But a lot has changed since the trade throwdown in 2018.

In that year, Chinese automakers built just under 800,000 electric vehicles. By 2023, EV output had jumped by a factor of eight times, China had surpassed Japan as the world's biggest auto exporter and Chinese carmakers were cranking up expansion plans from Southeast Asia to Europe.

Huawei, which had been crippled by US sanctions in 2019, has bounced back, spearheading demand for China-made chips and challenging Apple in the China smartphone business and Tesla for EVs.

"What does not kill you makes you stronger," Xinhua said in a commentary on the US tariffs. "It seems the famous quote applies to China's technology companies."