Apple holds talks with rival Meta over AI

AFP, *Washington*

Apple is talking to major rival Meta about integrating the Facebook parent company's generative AI into its products, as it tries to catch up with rivals on artificial intelligence, the Wall Street Journal reported Sunday.

The report comes after Apple also struck a deal with OpenAI, the creator of ChatGPT, to help equip its Apple Intelligence suite of new AI features for its coveted products.

For months, pressure has been on Apple to persuade doubters on its AI strategy, after Microsoft and Google rolled out products in rapid-fire succession.

It has developed its own, smaller artificial intelligence but said that it will turn to others such as OpenAI to boost its in-house offering.

According to the Journal, which cited sources close to the matter, Meta has held discussions with Apple over integrating its own generative AI model into Apple Intelligence.

For months, pressure has been on Apple to persuade doubters on its AI strategy

Apple senior vice president of software engineering Craig Federighi said in early June that Apple also wanted to integrate capabilities from Google's generative AI system, Gemini, into its devices.

The big challenge for Apple has been how to infuse ChatGPT-style AI -- which voraciously feeds off data -- into its products without weakening its heavily promoted user privacy and security, according to analysts.

Apple Intelligence will enable users to create their own emojis based on a description in everyday language, or to generate brief summaries of e-mails in the mailbox.

Apple said Siri, its voice assistant, will also get an AI-infused upgrade and now will appear as a pulsating light on the edge of your home screen.

Launched over 12 years ago, Siri has long since been seen as a dated feature, overtaken by the new generation of assistants, such as GPT-4o, OpenAI's latest offering.

According to Canalys, 16 percent of smartphones shipped this year will be equipped with generative AI features, a proportion it expects to rise to 54 percent by 2028.

KEY NUMBERS

- Total population in Bangladesh: **16.98**cr
- Labour force: **7.30**cr
- Total unemployed people: **25.82** lakh

YOUTH

- Youth Labour force [15-29 years]: **2.68**cr
- Total youth unemployment: **21.48** lakh
- Unemployment among graduates: **27.8**%

NEET people
(not in employment, education or training)

- Number of total young people who are NEET: **96.49** lakh
- NEET as % of youth working population: **22**%

What's missing for young people in the budget?

MD ASADUZ ZAMAN

Bangladesh's high youth unemployment rate necessitates specific remedial steps, including ways for employment generation and adoption of prerequisite education and training, which the proposed national budget for fiscal year 2024-25 did not include, according to analysts.

Moreover, it does not delineate a definite plan addressing the needs of youth who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), they said.

The budget provided little hope to young people, talking about initiatives the state has already taken towards the creation of vocational training facilities.

This contradicts the priority paced by the incumbent government, which has come to power for a fourth consecutive term in January this year, on employment generation in tune with the nation's 8th Five-Year Plan.

According to Labour Force Survey 2022 of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), there were 7.30 crore people in the labour force.

Of them, 2.68 crore were youths, meaning those between the ages of 15 to 29 years.

Around 21.48 lakh of these youths were unemployed. This is 83 percent of the total unemployed people in Bangladesh.

Of the unemployed youths, 28 percent have passed the tertiary level of education or graduates.

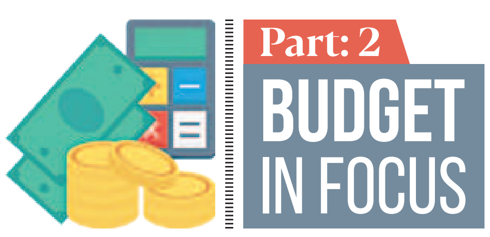
A study by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Research recently revealed that as many as 28 percent of students remain unemployed even three years after graduating from the colleges under National University.

Besides, there are 96.49 lakh youths under the NEET category. Of them, 63 lakh are females.

"The youth and the job seeking population as a whole have been left to fend for themselves. There is no good news for them," said Rizwanul Islam, a former special employment adviser of International Labour Organization.

There has been a lot of talk on issues like youth unemployment in recent times and not over NEET. "And yet, the budgetary exercise has not shown any sensitivity to the situation," he said.

Islam added that employment was not an issue to be dealt with just by one budget or any other instrument through a one-off intervention.



"It requires a multi-pronged approach with an integrated application of monetary, fiscal, industrial, trade and other policies. There has never been such an approach in Bangladesh," he said.

"Even if one talks about limited fiscal intervention, this year's budget is an example of broken promises and dashed expectations in that there were some mentions of it in the ruling party's election manifesto and in the pre-budget statements," he said.

"And yet, one finds precious little in the actual budget."

Islam added that when an economy goes through a growth recession, the strategy could be recalibrated to seek more jobs from a given amount of output growth. "No thinking along such lines is seen," he said.

Economist Hossain Zillur Rahman said: "In this proposed budget, the youth is a kind of ignored or overlooked subject. Adequate understanding of the issues of young people is missing."

The existing budget for fiscal year 2023-24, which ends this month, contains a Tk 100 crore special allocation for the youth and women to facilitate professional skills development, he said.

But there has been no such announcement for the next fiscal year and no follow-up on the existing allocation, he said.

"What has happened to the fund?" questioned Rahman, also executive chairman of the Power and Participation Research Centre.

"It seems that they take sudden one-off decisions without following a systematic way," he said.

Bangladesh is passing through a critical time when it is crucial to reap the demographic dividend and for this, issues involving young people are vital, added Rahman, also chairman of BRAC, the world's largest NGO.

Towfiqul Islam Khan, a senior research fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue, said employment creation has been featured as a priority in the election manifesto of the incumbent government.

"Regrettably, the budget did not mention any target for the upcoming fiscal year," he said.

Vocational training programmes gained importance in this budget in tune with that over the last couple of years, he said.

In his budget speech, Finance Minister Abul Hassan Mahmood Ali, who placed his maiden budget, said there was an ongoing programme to establish 100 technical schools and colleges in each of the 100 upazilas.

Of them, 91 newly-constructed technical colleges have started educational programmes. He also mentioned that the establishment of four women's polytechnic institutes in Sylhet, Barishal, Rangpur, and Mymensingh divisions was underway.

READ MORE ON B2

The decline of marble industry in Bangladesh

RASHADUR RAHMAN

Marble, once a symbol of luxury, no longer holds its esteemed position in Bangladesh's market. Today, the industry is suffering, and customers are facing numerous challenges. The number of suppliers has increased dramatically.

Today, customers do not need to visit the market to choose their marble. When a construction site needs marble or granite, countless vendors bring samples directly to the site. There are so many samples that they could cover a couple of rooms for free. With so many suppliers, customers are forced to haggle over prices, choosing the lowest offer.

Unlike other flooring materials, marble samples can be misleading. A small, attractive piece of marble is easy to provide, even from low-quality slabs. When the actual marble slab arrives at the site, it is usually unpolished, making it hard for customers to see the true colour and quality.

The client hires an installer to cut and polish the slabs. Then comes the surprise! The finished marble often looks very different from the sample. There are colour variations, dark spots, and flaws, making the floor look unpleasant. By this time, it is too late to complain.

Suppliers include a small clause on their invoice stating, "Sample provided is a mere example and being a natural material, shades and colour may vary." This statement, though true, is used unfairly.

The problems do not end there. Over time, homeowners or office residents start noticing cracks in the marble. They have no choice but to live with these defects because replacing the marble is too costly and disruptive.

Over time, the government has increased taxes on raw marble and granite blocks but has lowered the import tax on finished marble slabs. This has resulted in lost revenue for the government and difficulties for factory owners

A significant issue in the industry is that today anyone can import marble and granite blocks at the same tax rates as industrial importers. Traders often import very low-quality blocks and use multiple trade licences to avoid taxes and value-added taxes.

Some factories equipped with poorly functioning processing machines cut these blocks for a small fee without taking into consideration the final output. Factories processing these blocks also do not pay VAT properly.

To survive in this competitive market, many factories are compromising on quality. With huge bank loans, high energy and overhead costs and big tax claims, these factories are struggling because of unfair competition with traders. The result is unhappy customers, struggling factory owners, and lost tax revenue for the government.

Only factory owners should be allowed to import raw blocks. This would ensure proper tax collection, improve the quality of imported materials, and guarantee better products for customers.

Over time, the government has increased taxes on raw marble and granite blocks but has lowered the import tax on finished marble slabs. This has resulted in lost revenue for the government and difficulties for factory owners. Addressing this issue would help the government increase tax collection and support the industry.

By implementing these measures, the government can restore the marble industry's reputation and ensure sustainable growth for both factory owners and customers. This will lead to happier customers, healthier factories, and better tax revenues for the government.

The author is managing director of Marble Di Carrara (Pvt.) Ltd.

China wants EU to remove tariffs on EVs by July 4

REUTERS, *Beijing*

Beijing wants the EU to scrap its preliminary tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles by July 4, China's state-controlled Global Times reported, after both sides agreed to hold new trade talks.

Provisional European Union duties of up to 38.1 percent on imported Chinese-made EVs are set to kick in by July 4 while the bloc investigates what it says are excessive and unfair subsidies.

China has repeatedly called on the EU to cancel its tariffs, expressing a willingness to negotiate. Beijing does not want to be embroiled in another tariff war, still stung by US tariffs on its goods imposed by the Trump administration, but says it would take all steps to protect Chinese firms should one happen.

Both sides agreed to restart talks after a call between EU Commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis and China's Commerce Minister on Saturday during a visit to China by Germany's economy minister, who said the doors for discussion are "open".

China's Global Times, citing observers, said the best outcome is that the EU scraps its tariff decision before July 4. But the Commission, analysts and European trade lobby groups stressed that talks would be a major undertaking and China would need to come willing to make major concessions.

"Nobody will dare to do this now. Not before the elections in France," said Alicia Garcia Herrero, senior

READ MORE ON B2

Red Sea gives shipping an Uber-style price surge

REUTERS, *London*

Anyone who has tried to secure an Uber at a busy time of day will have experienced the ride-hailing app's least appealing feature: surge pricing. Too many punters and too few available cars mean the cost of getting from A to B spikes. Something similar is currently afflicting the global shipping sector.

In the wake of Iran-aligned Houthi militants launching missiles at ships heading for the Suez Canal, freight rates more than doubled from around $1,200 per trip in 2023 to a January peak of $3,400. That's according to an index compiled by shipping platform Freightos, which tracks spot prices for 40-foot containers in 12 major trade lanes. Prices fell back in March and April, but since May they've rebounded to hit $4,500 – over triple their pre-crisis level.

On the face of it, the recent shipping cost spike is odd. The traditional peak season for exporters filling Christmas orders is some way off. And unlike the aftermath of the pandemic in 2021, when rates ballooned to nearly $12,000, there should be enough ships – in fact, the industry has struggled to absorb a record number of new vessels ordered in response to the Covid-era disruptions. In 2023, new deliveries of container ships added record capacity of 2 million 20-foot equivalent containers (TEU), according to AXSMarine analyst Jan Tiedemann. Another 3 million will be added this year and a further 2 million TEU in 2025.

Yet a host of countervailing forces are inflating rates. One is the cyclical rebound of the world economy. Global manufacturing output accelerated, its fastest year-on-year pace in 22 months in May, according to a Purchasing Managers' Index produced by S&P Global. Combine that with major port strikes that have hit Germany, and France, and could also affect the United States on the East Coast and Gulf of Mexico, and rates would have upward pressure even if two other unusual factors weren't at play.

French business leaders don't seem too worried about the economic platform of far right leader Marine Le Pen.

One of these unconventional drivers may be that exporters have been trying to speed up cargo deliveries to avoid what they fear is increasingly protectionist trade policy. In May US President Joe Biden announced sharply raising tariffs on $18 billion of Chinese goods including electric vehicles, batteries, semiconductors, steel, solar cells and medical products.

With some of these expected to take effect as soon as August, this threat has triggered a race to front-load Chinese exports and stockpiling for importers, according to analysts at China International Bank-affiliated CIB Research. The United States contributed the biggest growth among developed markets in China's exports of goods in May, official data showed.

The trouble for exporters and importers is that geopolitical tensions may get worse. US allies such as the European Union are already under pressure to

READ MORE ON B2

A Maersk container ship is seen in the Strait of Gibraltar, heading towards the port of Algeciras, Spain. Freight rates more than doubled from around $1,200 per trip in 2023 to a peak of $3,400 in January this year, according to an index compiled by shipping platform Freightos.

PHOTO: REUTERS/FILE