



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

This wholesaler at Karwan Bazar yesterday claimed that his suppliers have not provided any eggs for the past 10 days, for which currently he only has duck eggs available for sale. There are around 40 to 50 wholesale shops in the area, a large number of which were found closed around noon. However, Taher Ahmed Siddiqui, president of Bangladesh Egg Producers' Association, which represents around 1,500 farmers, says there was no such break in supply from their end. The photo was taken around noon yesterday.

ICT experts demand taskforce to reduce data prices urgently

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Telecom and ICT industry experts yesterday proposed the formation of a specialised taskforce to urgently address the high cost of mobile and broadband data in Bangladesh.

Comprising telecom and technology specialists, the proposed taskforce's primary goal will be to develop strategies to reduce data prices within the next three months to make internet access more affordable for millions of users.

The recommendation was made during a roundtable discussion, titled "The Use of Technology for Inclusive Development: A New Journey", organised by the Tech Industry Policy Advocacy Platform (TIIPAP) at the Bishwo Shahitto Kendro auditorium in the capital.

Fahim Mashroor, former president of the Bangladesh Association of Software and Information Services (BASIS), presented a paper with a 20-point recommendation to the interim government, aimed at boosting internet accessibility and improving digital infrastructure.

One significant suggestion was the creation of an expert committee to analyse various components of internet service in Bangladesh. The committee will focus on eliminating monopolistic practices, reducing operational costs, and fostering

healthy competition, ultimately ensuring more affordable internet for all, he said.

Another crucial recommendation was the development of a coordinated plan to help low-income citizens acquire smartphones with minimal or zero down payments.

The initiative would involve telecom companies working in partnership with financial institutions to make smartphones more accessible, thereby bridging the digital divide.

He also called for the introduction of toll-free numbers for essential citizen services, similar to those in developed nations.

This would include services like healthcare, education, legal aid, and complaint filing.

By ensuring these services are free to access, the goal is to make them more widely available to the general public by removing financial barriers that may currently exist, he added.

Addressing data usage issues, the paper highlighted that many mobile users cannot access critical apps such as mobile financial services like bKash or Nagad or ride-hailing services such as Pathao or Uber when their data balance runs low.

To counter this, the roundtable recommended that telecom operators work with app developers to ensure that essential services remain accessible even without an

active data plan. This could be achieved through subsidy programmes or cost-sharing models, as seen in other countries.

Mashroor emphasised the need to ensure the availability of 4G technology nationwide while accelerating the rollout of 5G services.

Cybersecurity concerns were also raised, especially in light of recent hacking incidents involving national data infrastructure.

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The proposal called for the formation of a dedicated expert committee to investigate these incidents and recommend immediate action to enhance cybersecurity.

The committee would report back within a month with strategies for securing sensitive data, particularly in critical sectors like banking.

A taskforce of industry experts and entrepreneurs should be formed to address the challenges faced by freelancers, such as payment issues and

access to incentives.

The proposals include introducing global payment platforms like PayPal and Stripe, reducing import duties on essential equipment and exempting freelancers from income taxes for the next decade.

Additionally, measures should be taken to simplify the process of repatriating foreign earnings and making international payments.

Mahtab Uddin Ahmed, a former CEO of Robi Axiata, highlighted that a swift reform could start with the abolishment of the International Gateway Operators Forum within a month, ending discriminatory revenue-sharing and ensuring call terminations at actual rates, benefiting all parties.

However, deeper reforms, such as restructuring licensing layers, require cancelling or not renewing licences, a complex process, he said.

Mustafa Mahmud Hussain, a telecom expert, underscored the pressing need to develop more purposeful local content, highlighting that 70-75 percent of internet usage in Bangladesh is consumed by entertainment platforms.

He advocated for a shift towards content that drives learning, fosters personal development, and supports economic growth, ultimately contributing to the nation's broader progress.

IMF approves changes to cut borrowing costs by 36%

AFP, Washington

The IMF approved reforms on Friday that will lower members' borrowing costs by 36 percent and lift eight indebted countries out of the requirement to pay more to borrow money.

The suite of changes agreed to by the International Monetary Fund's executive board include adjustments to the surcharges paid by countries with high levels of debt, like Ukraine and Argentina, the Washington-based institution announced in a statement.

The reforms, which come into effect on November 1, will raise the threshold of debt at which IMF members countries start paying the surcharges, lifting eight of the countries out of the requirement to pay the additional borrowing costs, it added.

They are: Benin, Ivory Coast, Gabon, Georgia, Moldova, Senegal, Sri Lanka, and Suriname.

The IMF estimates that only 11 countries will meet the requirement to pay the surcharge once the new policy begins.

Combined, the measures approved on Friday "will lower IMF borrowing costs for members by 36 percent, or about US\$1.2 billion annually," the Fund's managing director, Kristalina Georgieva, said in a statement.

"In a challenging global environment and at a time of high interest rates, our membership has reached consensus on a comprehensive package that substantially reduces the cost of borrowing, while safeguarding the IMF's financial capacity to support countries in need," she said.

Russian inflation slows in Sept but still elevated

AFP, Moscow

Inflation ticked lower in Russia in September but was still more than double the central bank's target, as huge spending on the Ukraine conflict kept upward pressure on prices, official data showed Friday.

The annual rate of inflation was 8.63 percent in September 2024, slightly down from 9.05 percent in August but well above the central bank's target of four percent, according to data from the Rosstat state statistics agency.

Russia has spent billions of dollars on its soldiers and arms industry since sending troops into Ukraine, a spending surge that has swelled its economy but also sent prices soaring.

The Kremlin is set to boost its defence budget by almost 30 percent next year as it diverts resources to the offensive, spending more on the military than welfare and education combined.

Over the past year, the Russian central bank has aggressively raised interest rates in a bid to cool what it has warned is an unsustainable economic growth rate due to the massive increase in outlays on defence.

EU chief says China must 'adapt its behaviour' to solve trade row

AFP, Vientiane

China must "adapt its behaviour" to solve an escalating tariff row with Europe, EU chief Charles Michel told AFP Friday, warning of the dangers of the dispute escalating into a full-blown trade war.

The European Council president met Chinese Premier Li Qiang on the margins of a Southeast Asian summit in Laos as Beijing and the European Union impose tit-for-tat penalties on each other's imports in a row about subsidies and protectionism.

Michel said in an interview with AFP that after his "frank and candid" talks with Li, he hoped a deal could be struck in the coming days or weeks - but he warned that getting there would be tough.

"I have the impression that the door is not closed, but it's a

very difficult situation, it's very challenging," he said.

"We count on China to adapt its behaviour and to understand that we have to rebalance the economic relationships for more fairness, for fair competition, for a more level playing field."

China and the 27-member bloc are vehemently at odds over Beijing's generous subsidies for its industries, which Brussels says unfairly undercut European competitors.

Brussels has decided to impose swinging new tariffs of up to 35.3 percent on imports of Chinese-made electric cars.

A furious Beijing has responded with new tariffs on EU-made brandy, alarming French producers, while Brussels is also investigating Chinese subsidies for solar panels and wind turbines.

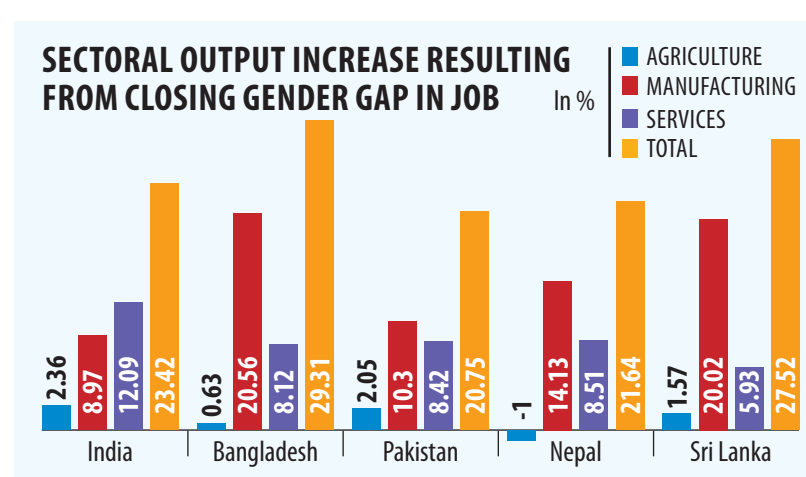
China is also tangled in a

bitter, wide-ranging trade dispute with the United States, with Washington announcing sharp tariff hikes targeting \$18 billion of Chinese goods including electric vehicles, EV batteries and solar cells.

Beijing reacted angrily to Michel's remarks Friday, condemning what it called the EU's "lose-lose" approach to the dispute.

"The EU should clearly recognise that imposing additional tariffs will not solve any problems," foreign ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said, urging the bloc to "take concrete actions and work together with China to seek solutions through discussions".

With the global economy rattled by conflict in Ukraine and fresh turmoil in the Middle East, Michel said it was better for all to avoid a trade war.



Economic output

FROM PAGE B1

"To increase women's participation in employment, both supply-side and demand-side constraints must be addressed," he remarked.

"Safety and security issues also contribute to the lower participation," the economist added. "The availability of transportation for women is also important. The government should take care of these issues."

The World Bank said Bangladesh has the least protective laws for women, leading to severe shortcomings in safety. According to the report, Bangladesh and Pakistan also have the most conservative social expectations for women.

Frustrating participation shadows promising outlook

The report said the female labour force participation rates in most South Asian countries are in the bottom quartile among emerging and developing countries and far below male participation rates.

"South Asia's female labour force participation rate of 32 percent is well below the 54 percent average in emerging market and developing economies," said Franziska Ohnsorge, World Bank chief economist for South Asia.

However, this contrasts with the share of female employment in a range of export-oriented sectors across South Asia, such as ready-made garments in Bangladesh, call

centres in India, and textiles in Sri Lanka.

The multilateral lender said increased female participation in the workforce could boost India's output by 23 percent, Pakistan's by 21 percent, Nepal's by 22 percent and Sri Lanka's by 28 percent.

If more women were to access manufacturing jobs, output in India would rise by 9 percent, it said.

Low female employment means a substantial loss of aggregate and per capita incomes. Raising women's labour force participation rate to parity with men would increase regional GDP by 13-51 percent, with larger impacts if capital and labour markets are more flexible, it said.

"South Asia's outlook is undoubtedly promising, but the region could do more to realise its full economic potential," said Martin Raiser, World Bank vice president for South Asia.

World Bank Chief Economist for South Asia Franziska Ohnsorge said, "Increasing women's employment requires action from all stakeholders; a multi-pronged effort where governments, the private sector, communities and households all have a role to play."

Echoing these sentiments, Raiser said key policy reforms to integrate more women into the workforce and remove barriers to global investment and trade could accelerate growth.

Grameen Bank's tax waiver reinstated

FROM PAGE B1

The previous government did not extend the exemption after that period.

"Although Grameen Bank is a bank by name, it actually runs microcredit activities like a non-government organisation [NGO]," NBR Chairman Khan told The Daily Star yesterday.

So, the services of Grameen Bank are similar to those of microcredit institutions. It is fair for Grameen Bank to get an income tax exemption, which it used to get previously, he said.

Meanwhile, the NBR, in a separate notification, said no income tax would be applicable on donors of As-Sunnah Foundation, a charity organisation.

The facility will continue until June 2029. However, the donors will have to submit their tax returns too.

As-Sunnah Foundation is a non-political and non-profit government-registered organisation.

The foundation was established in 2017 by Shaikh Ahmadullah, who came into the limelight for relief efforts during the recent floods and post-flood rehabilitation activities, including in Feni and Cumilla.

During the floods, As-Sunnah Foundation raised over Tk 100 crore in relief funds, Ahmadullah stated in a video interview by newspaper Kalbela.

Besides, the organisation was praised for charitable activities during the pandemic and the 2023 Turkey-Syria earthquake.

The tax administration has taken the move to encourage these kinds of philanthropic activities, according to an official of the NBR.

Inward remittance through MFS

FROM PAGE B1

Over the years, bKash has built a robust partnership ecosystem for remittances whereby seamless cross-border fund transfers can be initiated from more than 130 countries through Money Transfer Operators (MTOs) and leading commercial banks, Ahmed said.

He added that remittances received through bKash could be accessed anytime, anywhere.

Families of the expatriates can utilise remittance to take various services through their bKash accounts, including paying for goods and services, utility bills, and educational and government fees. They can also send money, donations and many other services from the comfort of their homes, he said.

In addition to offering convenient, instant, and secure remittance

transfers, bKash has lowered cash-out fees, he added.

Beneficiaries can now withdraw remittances at a minimal cost of Tk 7 per thousand from approximately 2,500 ATMs of 19 leading commercial banks, Ahmed said.

"Furthermore, bKash has collaborated with various organisations and launched regular campaigns with attractive offers to encourage the use of legal remittance channels among expatriates and raise awareness. These efforts have contributed significantly to the growth of remittance inflows in Bangladesh."

Muhammad Zahidul Islam, head of media and communications at Nagad, said they had witnessed significant remittance earnings in August.

"With the natural growth, we from

Nagad have also given tremendous effort to bring more remittances, such as by onboarding world-class foreign partners. Currently, people from more than 200 countries can send remittances through Nagad to Bangladesh," he said.

He said Nagad has already started a Tk 100 cashback campaign on top of the 2.5 percent government incentive to further boost inward remittance, adding that it had garnered a huge response from non-resident Bangladeshis.

"We have observed that these efforts have regained respect for us and the number of transactions has grown rapidly over time."

Through such measures, top MFS providers like Nagad are playing a vital role in strengthening and elevating the country's foreign exchange reserves, he added.