

star BUSINESS

BB discovers irregularities at Al-Arafah Islami Bank

MD MEHEDI HASAN

The Bangladesh Bank (BB) has uncovered serious irregularities at Al-Arafah Islami Bank, including misuse of its corporate social responsibility (CSR) funds.

The central bank also found evidence of suspicious transactions involving two personal employees of the bank's former chairman as well as unauthorised incentive bonuses for its managing director and other senior officials.

Following the political changeover in August last year, BB dissolved the bank's board of directors led by Abdus Samad Labu and appointed a five-member interim board in place.

Labu, the preceding chairman of Al-Arafah Islami Bank, is the vice chairman of the controversial S Alam Group and brother to its Chairman Mohammed Saiful Alam.

Separate inspections by the central bank and Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit (BFIU) revealed serious financial mismanagement within the Shariah-based bank.

Evidence shows misuse of CSR funds, excessive bonus payments and suspicious transactions involving two personal employees of the bank's former chairman

According to the central bank's inspection report, the Al-Arafah Islami Bank Foundation submitted an office note on December 14, 2023, seeking approval to disburse Tk 10 crore for distributing blankets.

The request was signed by the commercial lender's former chairman Labu and later approved by its Managing Director Farman R Chowdhury.

Chowdhury had suggested at the time that the matter should be presented to the board of directors for post-facto approval. But when the related memorandum was submitted, the then board chairman Labu refused to sign it and instead instructed not to place it before the board.

Despite the lack of approval, the whole amount was transferred to an account under the Al-Arafah Islami Bank Foundation at the bank's Gulshan branch, with Labu holding the authority to withdraw funds from this account.

The funds were subsequently withdrawn through cheques signed by Labu, which were submitted by his personal chauffeur and office secretary.

The inspection report confirmed that board approval is mandatory for such CSR expenditures, but was not obtained in this case. Besides, there was no evidence of any payments made to blanket vendors.

Labu fled the country following the political changeover on August 5, when a

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No tenure extension for closed-end mutual funds
Recommendations taskforce

AHSAN HABIB

All closed-end mutual funds must be redeemed on reaching maturity and no tenure extension will be allowed, recommended a government-formed taskforce.

However, such funds may get converted into open-ended mutual funds if three-fourth of unit holders, based on the percentage of ownership, vote for it, it said.

A host of recommendations for capital market reforms, formulated through consultations with stakeholders, were handed over to the Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission (BSEC) on Sunday.

Closed-end mutual funds are fixed amounts of money gathered from a number of investors, usually for a decade, in order to be reinvested into stocks, bonds and other assets.

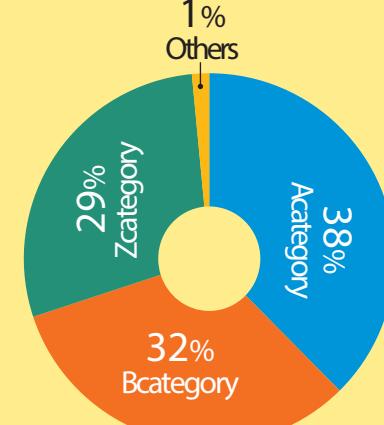
Open-ended mutual funds are not listed with the stock market, but one can buy them from a fund manager's office on the basis of its net asset value.

Similarly, investors can sell off fund units at any time at prices based on its current net asset value.

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Too many weak firms get through IPO net

PRESENT STATUS OF LISTED FIRMS that got approval in the last 14 years
In % of approved IPOs; SOURCE: DSE



CASE OF SIKDER INSURANCE

Invested 73% of its assets to buy shares of problem-ridden National Bank. Breached insurance rules by investing heavily in a single company. Despite the irregularities, BSEC approved its IPO and it got listed in 2024. Within one year, it became a junk stock.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Market entry and exit policy for firms should be made easier.

Firms should be liquidated or their boards should be restructured depending on existing situation.

A special investigation should be carried out into recent IPOs.

BSEC and issuers managers should be held accountable for bringing weak firms into stock market.

AHSAN HABIB

More than two thirds of companies that got listed on the stock market in the last 14 years were subsequently downgraded to lower categories, with many turning into junk stocks soon after listing.

This has led market analysts to question their motivation for listing: were these decisions sound, or did they go public when they were already on the brink of financial meltdown?

For a better understanding, consider the case of Sikder Insurance – the non-life insurer that holds the record for being downgraded to junk status within just one year of its market listing.

The Dhaka Stock Exchange (DSE) expressed reservations about the listing of Sikder Insurance.

The objection was well-founded, given factors such as the insurer's heavy investment in the loss-making National Bank – a company owned by its sponsors, and its lower-than-required investment in government T-bonds.

Both actions violate respective laws.

In 2022, Sikder Insurance invested Tk 132 crore, or 73 percent of its total assets, in National Bank, which was already classified as junk stock.

However, Insurance Development and Regulatory Authority (Idra) rules prohibit non-life insurance companies from investing more than 5 percent of their assets in a single stock.

In the same year of 2022, National Bank reported a record loss of Tk 3,260 crore, with 25 percent of its total loans classified as non-performing.

In contrast to National Bank, Sikder Insurance invested only Tk 2.5 crore, or 1.37 percent of its assets, in government treasury bonds – far below the required minimum of 7.5 percent.

The DSE flagged in its report to the Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission (BSEC) that it was not convinced about the listing.

But the company was approved to go public in 2023.

After its listing in 2024, Sikder Insurance announced a 3 percent cash dividend in June, but failed to disburse it. As a result, its stock was downgraded to Z-category.

Even if the company manages to distribute the dividend, it will only be upgraded to B-category, as a minimum 10 percent cash dividend is required for A-category status.

An analysis of the insurer's 2023 financial report showed that its problematic investment in National Bank remains unchanged.

Since National Bank has not paid dividends for four years, Sikder Insurance's earnings from its primary investment source remain zero.

Besides, the company has not increased its investment in treasury bonds, continuing to flout regulatory requirements.

The Sikder case is not an isolated incident. Many other companies show similar IPO-related issues, raising questions about the stock regulator's due diligence in approving listings.

For instance, Apollo Ispat, whose flagship product "Rani Marka Dhaa Tin", had already lost market relevance before its listing on the DSE.

Despite this, BSEC approved its IPO at a premium of Tk 12 per share, only for the company to decline

into junk status within a few years. On Thursday, the stock of Apollo Ispat traded at Tk 3,800.

ROTTEN STOCKS

Former BSEC chairman Faruq Ahmad Siddiqi said that these companies should never have been approved for listing, as their financials clearly indicated their businesses were in trouble.

According to DSE data, BSEC has approved 132 companies for listing, transitioning them from private to public entities over the last 14 years. However, nearly one-fourth of these companies have since become junk stocks.

Of the 132 companies approved, only 50 remain in A category, while 43 have been downgraded to B-category and 38 have fallen to Z-category. One company was merged with another listed company.

Siddiqi said that the BSEC should be held accountable for approving so many questionable IPOs over the past decade.

"This is the right time to do it," he said.

He suggested that regulators should conduct case-by-case inquiries to assess whether struggling companies are failing due to genuine business challenges or mismanagement and poor financial decisions.

Companies with no recovery potential should be liquidated, he added.

Saiful Islam, president of the DSE Brokers Association, said that "the impact of these types of rotten stocks is long-term."

Even if some of these IPOs were approved under political pressure, now is the time to delist underperforming companies, he commented.

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Stricter conditions proposed for margin loans

New prerequisites include Tk 10 lakh equity, six months' trading experience

AHSAN HABIB

A government-formed taskforce for capital market reforms has proposed a host of amendments to margin loan rules, including new eligibility criteria.

An investor must have a minimum equity of Tk 10 lakh alongside six months' experience in secondary market trading to be able to purchase stocks with money borrowed from brokers against securities as collateral.

Moreover, to ensure responsible lending, institutions providing margin loans must conduct mandatory risk profiling before approving financing.

Investors without stable earnings—such as students, homemakers, and retirees—will not be eligible unless classified as high-net-worth individuals.

These, alongside stricter regulations, have been proposed for a major overhaul of the Margin Rules, 1999, through the introduction of a new framework under the Equity Margin Rules, 2025.

The recommendations, formulated through consultations with stakeholders, were handed over to the Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission (BSEC) on Sunday.

Mismanagement of margin loans has harmed many institutions and investors since the market crashed in 2010 and 2011.

On one hand, margin loans have fuelled market liquidity; on the other, when lenders were not allowed to go for forced sales of assets to adjust loan balances, a huge amount of negative equity piled up.

Negative equity refers to an asset whose value has fallen below its outstanding debt.

This ultimately harmed many brokerage houses and merchant banks.

Negative equity against margin loans in the country's capital market amounted to Tk 9,700 crore at the end of November 2024, which was significantly higher than just a decade earlier.

Against this backdrop, the taskforce has proposed introducing stricter eligibility criteria, improved risk management, and greater transparency to stabilise the capital market and protect investors.

A key component of the reform is the restructuring of eligible collateral. The proposed framework allows margin financing against cash, listed A-category stocks, corporate bonds with a minimum BBB+ rating, and government securities.

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STOCKS	
DSEX ▲	CASPI ▲
0.34% 5,192.05	0.30% 14,519.34

COMMODITIES	
Gold ▲	Oil ▲
\$2,910.55 (per ounce)	\$72.84 (per barrel)

ASIAN MARKETS			
MUMBAI	TOKYO	SINGAPORE	SHANGHAI
▼ 1.49% 76,155.98	▲ 0.04% 38,801.17	▼ 0.33% 3,862.44	▼ 0.12% 3,318.06

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management regulations to ensure environmental and workplace safety.

The adviser urged the business community and international partners to collaborate with their Bangladeshi counterparts to transition from fossil fuel-dependent energy production to renewable and sustainable sources.

He emphasised that energy supply shortages in the past two years have severely impacted industries, making sustainable energy solutions a necessity for both the country and the industry.

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Govt considers charging industries for water use



STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The government is considering charging industrial unit owners for water usage and will categorise industries based on water consumption while offering incentives for recycling initiatives, said Environment Adviser Syeda Rizwana Hasan yesterday.

Closed-end mutual funds are fixed amounts of money gathered from a number of investors, usually for a decade, in order to be reinvested into stocks, bonds and other assets.

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TCB to sell essentials thru trucks in Ramadan

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) will sell certain essential commodities at subsidised rates to low-income people through mobile trucks during Ramadan.

REHAB Fair begins in Chattogram tomorrow

STAFF CORRESPONDENT,
Chattogram

The four-day "REHAB Chattogram Fair-2025" will begin at the Radisson Blu Chattogram Bay View in the port city tomorrow.

Shahadat Hossain, mayor of Chattogram City Corporation, is expected to inaugurate the housing fair as the chief guest.

Delwar Hossain, vice-president of REHAB and chairman of the Chattogram regional committee, shared the details of the show at a press conference in the port city yesterday.

"The fair will provide buyers with all services under one roof in a short time," Hossain said.

"Buyers will not only get information on flats and plots but also have the opportunity to explore home loans and building materials," he added.

"The REHAB Fair will help buyers find their desired flat or plot within their budget," he continued.

This will be the 16th edition of the housing fair organised by the Real Estate and Housing Association of Bangladesh (REHAB) Chattogram regional office.

This year, the fair will feature 42 stalls from different real estate companies across the country.

Among others, Mohammad Morshedul Hasan, director of REHAB and co-chairman-1 of the Chattogram Regional Committee; Syed Irfanul Alam; Nur Uddin Ahmed; Mohammad Mainul Hasan, committee members; and Rezaul Karim, a member of the fair organising committee, were also present.



Of the 1,400 lighter vessels transporting imported goods across the country, 950 are currently loaded, with around 350 held up at river points for 20-30 days or more.

PHOTO: STAR/FILE

Lighter shortage disrupts unloading at Ctg port

Mother vessels are provided with only one lighter against the demand for four

DWAIPAYAN BARUA, Ctg

Unloading of imported cargo at Chattogram port's outer anchorage has been severely disrupted for weeks due to an acute shortage of lighter vessels.

Currently, 43 mother vessels carrying over 6 lakh tonnes of various cargo, including essential commodities and industrial raw materials, are anchored at the outer anchorage.

Shipping agents report that most vessels are receiving far fewer lighter vessels than needed, with some getting none on certain days.

On Monday, the Bangladesh Water Transport Coordinating Cell (BWTCC) allocated only 44 lighter vessels for unloading these 43 mother vessels,

leaving at least four vessels without any support.

Cargo agents are requesting four lighter vessels per mother vessel but are only receiving one.

A vessel named S Breeze, carrying 47,000 tonnes of raw sugar, arrived on January 27 but still had 4,000 tonnes left to unload as of today.

Its local agent, Litumond Shipping, stated that insufficient lighter vessels extended the unloading process from the usual 5-6 days, leading to demurrage costs of \$20,000 per day.

The shortage stems from many lighter vessels being stuck at destinations for weeks.

Of the 1,400 lighter vessels transporting imports across the country, 950 are currently

loaded, with around 350 held up at river points for 20-30 days or more.

Industry insiders allege that some importers are using lighter vessels as floating warehouses, delaying unloading to manipulate the market.

This practice has worsened the crisis, warned GM Khan, executive director of the BWTCC.

Parvez Ahmed, vice president of the Inland Vessel Owners Association of Chattogram (IVOAC), cautioned that such delays could lead to higher freight rates as mother vessels incur longer port stays.

In response, the Department of Shipping held a stakeholder meeting on Monday and warned of mobile court actions against importers who keep lighter vessels beyond reasonable periods.

Stricter conditions proposed

FROM PAGE B1

However, securities under legal restrictions or going through lock-up periods after initial public offerings (IPO), illiquid stocks or those that cannot be readily sold without a substantial loss in value, shares mired in rumours, and companies nearing insolvency will be excluded.

Additionally, power plants with limited life cycles will not qualify for margin financing in the last two years before expiry.

Another major change is a shift to a market-driven interest rate structure. Previously, interest rates on margin loans were regulated, but under the new rules, lenders will have the flexibility to set rates based on market conditions.

However, the lenders must notify clients at least 15 days in advance before implementing any rate changes. In a major relief for investors, no interest will be charged on negative equity accounts.

To eliminate inconsistencies, all lenders must follow a standardised margin loan agreement. Online agreements will also be facilitated, making the process more transparent and accessible.

Additionally, margin loan contracts must have a fixed expiry period, ranging from six months to one year, with renewals subject to compliance with rules.

A stricter risk management system is also being recommended. The collateral must be deposited

before any transaction, replacing the current practice that allows a seven-day window.

Investors will be required to maintain an equity level of at least 150 percent of the summation of the initial equity and margin loan availed afterwards. If the equity falls below this threshold, the deficit must be met through the deposit of funds within three working days.

Lenders will have full discretion to liquidate holdings if the equity drops below 125 percent. However, if lenders fail to act immediately, they will be held liable for any financial losses suffered by clients.

To further mitigate risks, the maximum margin loan ratio will be capped at 1:1, meaning an investor cannot borrow more than their own equity contribution.

To curb overexposure, the taskforce has proposed new limits on margin financing. No single client will be allowed to exceed 10 percent of a lender's capital, with a maximum exposure of 15 percent for related group or family accounts.

Similarly, single sector exposure will be limited to 30 percent, while single stock exposure will be capped at 25 percent of a lender's total exposure.

Stock exchanges will publish a daily list of marginable securities based on earnings, liquidity, and volatility factors, ensuring that only fundamentally strong stocks qualify.

To enhance regulatory oversight, the proposal includes segregating cash

and margin accounts. Clients will be required to maintain separate accounts to prevent the misuse of investor funds.

Deposits and financing will be routed through dedicated accounts, and margin accounts will no longer be accepted for IPO applications.

Dividends from margin-held securities must be credited directly to the lending institution, and the renunciation of rights shares to third parties will not be permitted.

A major addition to the framework is the introduction of record-keeping focusing on how stocks react to market-wide stress.

Stock exchanges will be responsible for recording the patterns to assess the resilience of the margin lending system under extreme market conditions.

Additionally, margin lenders must submit a monthly report of their total margin exposure to stock exchanges.

These measures are expected to improve market stability by preventing excessive leverage and ensuring that lenders remain accountable.

Market analysts believe these rules will bring much-needed discipline and transparency to margin trading.

Some investors have raised concerns over the new margin loan eligibility criteria and loan recall provisions, arguing that those could limit market participation.

However, analysts opine that these long-overdue reforms are necessary, as the stock market should not be a place for investments made with borrowed money.

Govt considers

FROM PAGE B1

"Having green factories or the highest number of environmentally certified factories does not automatically mean the sector is operating sustainably," she said, adding that the garment industry is not only energy-intensive but also heavily reliant on water and chemical management, making responsible production practices crucial.

"The term 'cheap labour' should be removed from our vocabulary when discussing sustainability," the adviser also said.

"It must be a shared responsibility between producers and consumers," she asserted, emphasising ethical sourcing and fair business practices.

She made these remarks at the inaugural ceremony of the Sustainable Apparel Forum (SAF) 2025, jointly organised by Bangladesh Apparel Forum (BAE) and the Netherlands Embassy at Radisson Hotel in Dhaka.

Michael Miller, the EU ambassador to Bangladesh, said that EU consumers have benefited from good value and high-quality products imported from Bangladesh.

"Partnerships between the EU and Bangladesh must evolve as we move forward," Miller said.

"We look to Bangladesh to increase its ambition when it comes to renewables. The EU is determined to work with Bangladesh to ensure

it is equipped with the capacity to provide opportunities for sustainable development," Miller added.

André Carstens, head of mission of the Netherlands in Bangladesh, said, "The Netherlands values its partnership with Bangladesh and recognises Bangladesh's leading role in the global RMG industry. We are committed to working together with Bangladesh to navigate its challenges."

Chowdhury Ashik Mahmud Bin Harun, executive chairman of the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA), said, "We, as a country, would like to be the leader in sustainable apparel by 2040."

Mostafiz Uddin, founder and chief executive officer of the BAE, said, "If you look into the efforts, we are creating collaboration and connection, increasing opportunity and investment, and further integrating the business. I think our initiatives will continue, and we will be doing impactful initiatives toward a sustainable future."

In addition, the Netherlands Circular Textile Trade mission to Bangladesh is scheduled from February 10-13, according to a statement.

With the participation of 18 Dutch companies leading in circularity and renewable energy, attendees found unparalleled opportunities for networking and matchmaking at the SAF.

BB discovers irregularities

FROM PAGE B1

mass uprising ousted the Awami League government.

The central bank inspection report also uncovered suspicious transactions linked to Labi's personal secretary Mohammad Piaru, as his bank account was found to contain Tk 15 crore.

It was also found that he was promoted every year, with his salary increasing nine times in a single year.

In response to these findings, Al-Arafah Islami Bank recently dismissed Piaru.

Additionally, the central bank inspection found that Managing Director Chowdhury and several other officials received incentive bonuses that violated regulations.

As per central bank guidelines, a bank's managing director can receive a maximum incentive bonus of Tk 15 lakh annually. However, Chowdhury received more than this limit.

Efforts to contact Chowdhury for comment were unsuccessful as he did

not respond by the time this report was filed. However, it has been confirmed that the bank's managing director and Deputy Managing Director Muhammed Nadim have returned the excess amounts they received as bonuses. Together, they refunded approximately Tk 54 lakh to the bank.

Nadim told The Daily Star he was given an amount equal to his basic salary as a bonus for his team finishing as runners up in a football tournament organised by the Bangladesh Association of Banks.

"However, the Bangladesh Bank objected to this, so I returned the money," he said.

Regarding the excess sum paid to Chowdhury, the deputy managing director said the central bank has a specific regulation regarding how much bonus a managing director can receive.

"Since he received more than the allowed amount, he too returned the excess," Nadim added.

No tenure

FROM PAGE B1

All closed-end mutual funds whose tenures were extended earlier must be redeemed on reaching maturity, said the taskforce.

Amid huge criticism from stock market analysts, the BSEC had allowed tenure extensions of several close-end mutual funds in 2018, that too without taking approval from unit holders.

This decision agitated investors who had waited for long to avail good profits.

It even prompted a foreign investor to file a case against the BSEC. However, the courts upheld the BSEC decision.

The taskforce recommended amending the mutual fund rules aiming to bring back investor confidence by introducing new investment policies, improving governance standards, enhancing investor protection, and ensuring operational efficiency.

It recommended specifying how different types of funds should be utilised.

For instance, at least 51 percent of equity funds must be invested in listed equities, meaning those in stock markets, while 65 percent of fixed income funds in fixed-income securities, such as bonds.

At least 50 percent of balanced funds must be invested in fixed-income securities or listed equities.

A minimum of 60 percent of money market funds must be invested in fixed-income securities with maturity periods of less than one year.

At least 30 percent of Shariah-compliant funds must be allocated to listed Shariah-compliant securities.

"Investments in non-listed equities, non-listed bonds, preferred shares, and open-end funds or ETFs (exchange-traded funds) are prohibited unless approved by the BSEC," said the taskforce.

It proposed to increase the single stock investment limit of a single fund from 10 percent to 15 percent, while the single sector limit from 25 percent to 30 percent. The maximum shareholding by a single fund in a company should be reduced from 15 percent to 10 percent, it said.

Investment in Alternative Trading Board and Small Capital Board securities is limited to 10 percent.

Deposits in banks and non-bank financial institutions are capped at 30 percent, except for fixed income and money market funds where the limit is 40 percent.

One-third of the boards of asset management companies (AMC) must be comprised of independent directors.

Hili land port misses revenue target in Jul-Dec

KONGKON KARMAKER

The Hili Land Port in Dinajpur has reported a revenue shortfall of Tk 43.93 crore for the July-December period of the fiscal year 2024-25, raising concerns over declining trade activity and policy challenges.

According to sources at Hili Customs, the port collected Tk 318.76 crore against a target of Tk 362.69 crore in the first half of the current fiscal year.

Notably, the port experienced revenue surpluses in July and October, collecting Tk 45.74 crore and Tk 74.55 crore, respectively, surpassing targets of Tk 45.09 crore and Tk 62.65 crore.

However, deficits in other months contributed to the overall shortfall.

The National Board of Revenue (NBR) set an annual revenue target of Tk 740 crore for Hili port for the ongoing fiscal year.

The port collected Tk 318.76 crore against a target of Tk 362.69 crore in the first half of the current fiscal year

Importers attribute the revenue shortfall to inconsistent tariff policies and bureaucratic hurdles.

Mostalizur Rahman, an importer, stated that the government's removal of tariffs on essential goods like rice, lentils, maize, and onions has led to lower revenue collection.

Additionally, fruit imports have declined due to customs regulations requiring truck-based tariff assessments instead of weight-based duties, discouraging traders and affecting the port's revenue.

Another importer, Jewel Hossain, highlighted challenges such as unpredictable US dollar exchange rates and customs inspections of 100 percent of imported goods, leading to delays and financial losses.

He noted that many traders prefer Benapole port over Hili port due to these issues.

Shahinur Islam, general secretary of the C&F Agents Association, warned that Hili port is gradually losing its importance to importers, leading to declining revenue.

He cited poor road conditions, restrictions on letter of credit (LC) openings, and harassment by customs officials as deterrents for high-duty imports through Hili port.

Musk-led group offers \$97.4b for OpenAI control

AFP, San Francisco

Elon Musk is leading an investment group offering \$97.4 billion for the nonprofit that controls OpenAI, marking a new front in his war with the ChatGPT-maker, the Wall Street Journal reported Monday.

Musk attorney Marc Toberoff said he submitted the bid to OpenAI's board of directors, according to the Journal.

"No thank you, but we will buy Twitter for \$9.74 billion if you want," OpenAI chief Sam Altman wrote in a post on X, formerly Twitter, apparently responding to the offer.

Musk, who bought X under its former moniker for \$44 billion in 2022, replied to the post by simply writing: "Swindler." Musk's attorney did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The Tesla boss and close ally of US President Donald Trump has been mired in an ongoing feud with Altman, with Musk filing repeated lawsuits against the San Francisco-based OpenAI.

Musk co-founded OpenAI in 2015, with the company becoming the world's leading AI startup since he left in 2018. He launched his own generative AI startup, xAI, in 2023.

"We created a bespoke structure: a for-profit, controlled by the non-profit, with a capped profit share for investors and employees," OpenAI said in a December blog post that outlined a plan to become a Delaware Public Benefit Corporation.

The shift would require the company to balance the interests of shareholders, stakeholders, and the public in a tilt away from non-profit, according to the post.



Experts say local furniture industry has built up its capacity over the years and is now making world-class products. The photo was taken from Kazir Dewri area of Chattogram city on Sunday.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAHMAN

Furniture exports rising. Can govt recognition spur the growth further?

JAGARAN CHAKMA

The government has declared furniture as the "Product of the Year" following a rebound in exports during the first seven months of the current fiscal year.

Local furniture makers view the announcement as recognition for the sector and are calling for policy support, such as duty-free raw material imports and bonded warehouse facilities, to unlock its export potential.

The local furniture industry fetched \$26.67 million in merchandise shipments during the July-January period of FY 2024-25, a 13.65 percent increase compared to the same period last year, according to the Export Promotion Bureau (EPB).

Defying global economic headwinds, furniture exports saw a surge in FY 2021-22, reaching \$110.36 million in export earnings. However, the sector saw exports decline in FY 2022-23 and FY 2023-24, with earnings dropping to \$52.65 million and \$45.7 million, respectively.

But EPB officials said that the sector has shown resilience and potential over the past five years, indicating its capacity for sustained growth in the global market.

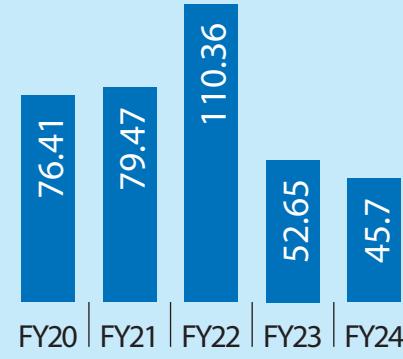
Besides, industry insiders believe that with strategic government support, such as duty-free raw material imports and competitive pricing structures, Bangladesh can further strengthen its position in the global furniture market.

The country's skilled workforce, combined with innovative design and cost-effective production, makes it a formidable competitor against leading exporters like Vietnam, they added.

Anwar Hossain, vice-chairman of EPB, said the sector could generate around \$3 billion in export earnings by 2030 if the government

Furniture exports in the last five years

In million \$; SOURCE: EPB



provides adequate policy support, including a bonded warehouse facility.

"Before declaring the 'Product of the Year', we conducted a study on the local and international market potential," Hossain said.

"The sector holds significant potential for future export growth. We have identified significant opportunities for export growth from Bangladesh," he noted.

Hossain pointed out that while the sector has promising prospects, it has not received the same level of government policy support as the readymade garment (RMG) industry.

"We have already discussed with the National Board of Revenue (NBR) ways to implement the bonded warehouse facility," he said. "Within the next three weeks, we expect positive news from the NBR, as they are actively working on it," he added.

According to him, the local furniture sector has built up its capacity and is producing world-class products.

"There is good scope for value addition and for generating more jobs," he said.

Kamruzzaman Kamal, marketing director of Pran-RFL Group which exports furniture under the brand name Regal Furniture, said that they need government support similar to those provided to China and Vietnam for importing raw materials.

If the government cooperates, the furniture sector will perform well in exports, Kamal commented.

According to the EPB vice-chairman, Bangladesh's domestic furniture market is valued at around Tk 30,000 crore annually, while its exports stand at around \$50 million.

In contrast, Vietnam's domestic furniture market is around \$2.5 billion, with furniture exports amounting to \$17 billion.

Hossain said increasing furniture exports has two key benefits.

He said the sector, being labour-intensive, would create many employment opportunities, and it would contribute to the country's overall export earnings.

Selim H Rahman, chairman and managing director of Hatil Furniture, a leading local manufacturer and exporter, said the declaration of "Product of the Year" is a recognition of the sector's potential in the export market.

"We have already proved that the furniture sector has a bright future for exports, as some manufacturers export furniture to the Middle East, India and Nepal," he said.

Rahman said that they have to import all furniture-making raw materials as those are not locally available.

"So, we need a bonded warehouse facility to import raw materials for the export market, similar to the RMG sector," he added.

According to him, the local furniture sector has built up its capacity and is producing world-class products.

"There is good scope for value addition and for generating more jobs," he said.

Kamruzzaman Kamal, marketing director of Pran-RFL Group which exports furniture under the brand name Regal Furniture, said that they need government support similar to those provided to China and Vietnam for importing raw materials.

If the government cooperates, the furniture sector will perform well in exports, Kamal commented.

Boosting FDI and export growth via ports

M MASRUR REAZ

FDI is an important avenue for technology transfer, capital mobilisation, market access, and job creation. It has played a pivotal role in advancing the ready-made garments (RMG) sector, establishing Bangladesh as a global leader in the industry. Despite the RMG success, Bangladesh continues to trail its regional counterparts in attracting foreign investment. In 2023, Bangladesh secured only \$3 billion in FDI which is significantly lower than Vietnam's \$18.5 billion and India's \$28.16 billion. At the same time, Bangladesh is in critical need to enhance its participation in the global value chain and diversify its export products and markets.

In this context, developing ports-led logistics infrastructure could be transformative in addressing these challenges by enhancing connectivity, reducing overall logistics costs and lead time, and creating an investor-friendly environment to attract higher levels of FDI. However, Bangladesh's current logistics infrastructure is underdeveloped and this will limit the industries and economy from reaching their full potential.

Chittagong Port, which handles over 90% of the nation's trade and about 98% of container trade, has been steadily increasing its capacity to handle cargo. The port is ranked 337th out of 405 in the World Bank's Container Port Performance Index 2023. According to the same report, ships face average turnaround times of 3.23 days at Chittagong, compared to Colombo's 0.86 days. Lastly, import clearance takes an average of 11 days, while export border compliance requires 36 hours.

Any efficiency gains in the ports will be negated if bottlenecks in the broader logistics ecosystem are not removed.

Road, rail, and inland waterway connectivity between ports and the cargo hinterlands remain inadequate, adding to transportation costs and delays. The recent launch of a National Single Window (NSW) system is a step in the right direction that will streamline the regulatory process and improve efficiency, but it will take time for the full implementation to proceed and the benefits to take effect. These challenges, coupled with limited port capacity, prevent Bangladesh from capitalising on its geographic advantage and robust manufacturing base.

According to the World Bank, the logistics costs in Bangladesh range from 4.5% to 48%, varying by sector, which is significantly higher compared to other trade partners and neighbouring countries. The report suggests that national export earnings could increase by 19% with targeted short-term and medium-term reforms in the logistics sector. A 1% reduction in transportation and logistics costs could boost the demand for Bangladeshi exports by up to 7.4%.

Some critical projects under planning, such as the Matarbari Deep Sea Port and the Bay Terminal in Chittagong, offer glimpses of hope. These initiatives promise to increase port capacity, reduce export lead times, and cut shipping costs by up to 15%. However, the success of these projects depends on swift completion of project preparations and roll out of the project implementation, as well as supporting infrastructure such as a breakwater and adequate dredging of the navigational channel, and complementary investments in hinterland connectivity, warehousing, and digitalisation.

Global examples like Vietnam and Singapore underscore the importance of embracing technology, encouraging private sector participation, and ensuring a policy framework that attracts long-term investments.

For Bangladesh, the path forward is clear. The government must prioritise private participation in port operations, engaging highly reputed global operators through public-private partnerships. This will also help mobilise foreign private capital at a time when the government needs to minimise its public spending until fiscal discipline is restored. Simplifying customs procedures, reducing regulatory barriers, and integrating digital tools like AI and blockchain can significantly enhance operational efficiency. Moreover, developing multimodal logistics systems that connect ports with industrial zones and economic hubs is crucial for unlocking the country's trade potential.

The author is the chairman and CEO of Policy Exchange Bangladesh

Trump's tariff tactics may reshape global trade: analysts

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump's use of tariffs as a blunt weapon to extract concessions from commerce to immigration and drug trafficking could redraw global trading norms, analysts say.

Since his inauguration on January 20, Trump has unveiled and paused blanket tariffs on Canadian and Mexican goods over migration and illegal fentanyl, and hiked duties on Chinese imports in the same breath, triggering retaliation.

And on Monday he imposed sweeping steel and aluminum levies, drawing comparisons to his first term when he imposed duties across both sectors before allowing exemptions.

Trump sees tariffs as a way to raise revenue, remedy trade imbalances and pressure countries to act on US concerns.

But "the degree of uncertainty about trade policy has basically exploded," said Maurice Obstfeld, senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics.

Analysts can try to predict where tariffs might be imposed based on economic variables, he told AFP, but basing trade policy on non-economic objectives could throw things into a tailspin. Trump's tactics could lead to a "retraction of global

supply chains," he warned, or countries seeking to decouple from the US market if risk levels are deemed too high.

Already, the scale of Trump's tariff threat is larger than before.

While he imposed sweeping duties on

steel and aluminum imports previously, alongside levies on hundreds of billions of dollars in Chinese products, he has now threatened all US partners.

Trump has vowed "reciprocal tariffs" to match levies that other governments



Cargo shipping containers sit on the Evergreen Ever Fame container ship docked at a container terminal at the Port of Los Angeles in California on February 3.

PHOTO: AFP

charge on US goods, and ordered a review of US trade deficits by April 1.

US officials are to recommend measures such as a global supplemental tariff to remedy deficits.

Across the board duties, if imposed, could affect more than \$3 trillion in imported goods. But Trump's reasons for levies on Canada and Mexico -- as well as a lower additional rate on China -- go beyond trade.

"It's not a tariff per se, it is an action of domestic policy," Trump's commerce secretary nominee Howard Lutnick told lawmakers at his confirmation hearing last month.

"I don't think anyone should be surprised about these tariffs or tariff threats," said Christine McDaniel, a senior research fellow at the Mercatus Center.

Trump "has been very clear that he sees them as an important tool in his toolkit," added McDaniel, a former official in George W. Bush's administration. "He views this as much of a negotiating tool, as he does in trying to balance trade."

Stephen Moore, a longtime external Trump advisor, sees tariffs as a way to "incentivize" countries to act in US interests, saying that partners like Canada, Mexico and China risk bigger losses economically than the United States.