DHAKA SUNDAY FEBRUARY 16, 2025, FALGUN 3, 1431 BS ● starbusiness@thedailystar.net

Star BUSINESS

Ramadan on the horizon, soybean oil still scarce

SUKANTA HALDER

Consumers say that the supply of bottled soybean oil has not improved significantly, while several players in the local supply chain have expressed mixed reactions regarding the outlook of the edible oil market ahead of Ramadan, when demand for the cooking staple nearly doubles.

On February 10, Commerce Adviser Sk Bashir Uddin stated that the edible oil market would normalise within a week. But five days after that comment, an edible oil wholesaler in Dhaka's key commodity market, Karwan Bazar, said the supply had instead declined.

Another trader in Chattogram's Khatunganj market mentioned yesterday that the supply had remained almost unchanged, while a trader in the capital's Moulvibazar reported an increase.

Consumers are also encountering a similar scenario.

A resident of the capital's West Dhanmondi area told The Daily Star that he couldn't find any bottled soybean oil at the first two retail shops he visited. At the third shop, he managed to find some, but not in the five-litre bottle he wanted. They only had two-litre bottles.

Meanwhile, Laizur Rahman, a resident of Rupnagar in Dhaka's Mirpur, said he was able to buy a five-litre bottle of soybean oil after searching through four different shops yesterday.

"The government says the edible oil crisis is artificial, but the problem is still not being resolved quickly," he said in frustration, referring to the Bangladesh Trade and Tariff Commission's statement on February 9 that the prevailing edible oil crisis was artificial.

Retailers and wholesalers in several markets in major cities, including Dhaka, Chattogram, and Barishal, said supply had been reduced after the government last month rejected refiners' requests to raise prices in the face of increased import costs.

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GDP may cross $500b for first time in FY26

Finance ministry estimates

REJAUL KARIM BYRON *and* MD ASADUZ ZAMAN

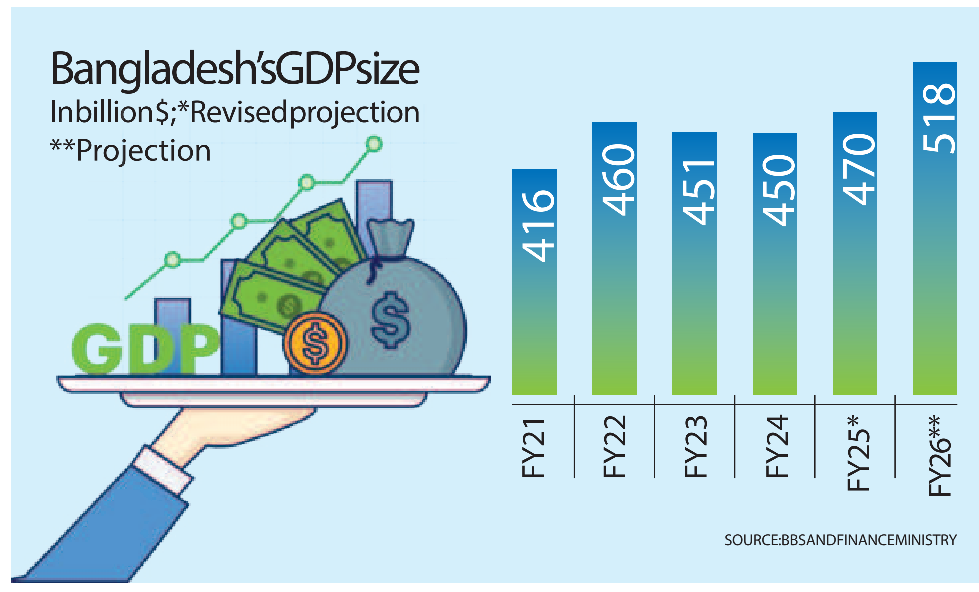
The finance ministry is likely to project that the country's gross domestic product (GDP) will surpass the $500-billion mark for the first time in the upcoming fiscal year (FY), anticipating an economic rebound in FY 2025-26.

The ministry made the estimate during a recent budget-related meeting attended by Finance Adviser Salehuddin Ahmed, according to finance ministry officials.

The Finance Division estimates that Bangladesh's GDP at current prices will reach $517.7 billion (Tk 6,315,923 crore) in FY26.

For the ongoing fiscal year, the initial GDP projection was $491 billion (Tk 5,597,414 crore) at current prices.

However, it is likely to be revised downward by $21 billion to $470 billion (Tk 5,645,114 crore), according to finance ministry sources.



This means the size of GDP will grow by 10.21 percent at current prices in FY26 than the revised estimate for the ongoing fiscal year.

However, according to the revised estimate, GDP may increase by 4.44 percent in the current fiscal year.

In the last fiscal year of 2023-24, Bangladesh's GDP stood at $450 billion (Tk 50,026,537 crore), according to data released by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS).

The finance ministry expects the economy to rebound in the coming years, with GDP crossing the $500-billion mark.

Similarly, foreign multilateral lenders, such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), World Bank, and International Monetary Fund (IMF), have projected higher growth in the coming years, despite lowering their economic growth projections for FY25.

For the next fiscal year, the finance ministry may project real GDP growth at 6 percent and inflation at 6.5 percent.

"This is a pragmatic projection, not an unrealistic one," said Ashikur Rahman, principal economist at the Policy Research Institute (PRI) of Bangladesh.

Rahman also expressed doubts about achieving the 6 percent real GDP growth target.

"Because investments have hit a snag with no sign of improvement anytime soon," he said. "Besides, the development spending has also slowed and there is no guarantee that it will bounce back in the next fiscal year."

In its latest monetary policy, the Bangladesh Bank (BB) projected private sector credit growth at 9.8 percent by June this year, which aligns with the finance ministry's revised projection.

"This projection underpins expectations of a modest overall balance of payments surplus, driven by inflows from official multilateral development partners, sustained growth in export revenues, and remittance inflows," said the monetary policy statement (MPS) published last week.

For the upcoming fiscal year, the finance ministry has projected that private sector credit growth will grow to 11 percent.

Along with the rising trend in exports and remittances, the overall volume of imports is expected to increase in the coming years.

Although import volumes were in negative territory before December last year, overall imports rose by 3.53 percent during the July–December period, according to central bank data.

In FY26, the finance ministry also expects imports to reach 10 percent.

"The government expects GDP size to cross the $500 billion mark, considering the above indicators," said a top finance ministry official.

Contacted, Mustafizur Rahman, a distinguished fellow at the Centre for Policy

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PHOTO: QUAMRUL ISLAM RUBAIYAT

Wheat acreage lowest on record

SOHEL PARVEZ *and* QUAMRUL ISLAM RUBAIYAT

Cultivation of wheat has hit the lowest on record in the current season in Bangladesh as many producers opted to grow potato and other high-value crops on land previously used for the second most important staple food after rice.

During the current fiscal year of 2024-25, acreage of wheat fell 8 percent year-on-year to 2.87 lakh hectares of land, according to provisional estimates by the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE).

That means it was cultivated on 3.11 lakh hectares of land a year ago.

This is the second consecutive year that wheat acreage has fallen, marking a gradual decline since FY16, when total acreage stood at 4.44 lakh hectares, the highest in nearly two decades.

Bangladesh cultivated the cereal on 8.88 lakh hectares in FY99, the highest in 37 years.

Agriculturists and farmers said multiple factors are responsible for the falling appetite of farmers toward wheat cultivation. Lower profits than maize, potato and other high-value vegetables is one of these factors.

Take Sazzad Selim, a farmer in Rosea village of Atwari under the north-western bordering district of Panchagarh, who cultivated wheat on a five-acre plot last year.

During the current year, he allocated all of his land for maize, cultivation of which has expanded rapidly over the past two and a half decades driven by demand from feed mills catering to domestic poultry, aquaculture and livestock farms.

"We can make higher profits than wheat if we grow maize and potato," he said.

The farmer was able to earn Tk 36,000 from each acre of land used for growing maize last year, whereas the amount of profit from the cultivation of wheat on the same area of land was Tk 20,000.

The major difference is the yield between wheat and maize, which brought him higher profit, though prices of wheat were much higher than maize.

Selim said, on an average, 40 maunds to 45 maunds (1 maund = 37.65 kg) of wheat can be harvested from one acre of land. In contrast, the same piece of land can provide a yield of 120 maunds to 150 maunds of maize.

During last year's harvest, each maund of wheat was sold for Tk 1,250 to Tk 1,350, whereas a maund of maize was sold for Tk 800, according to the farmer.

In its Grain and Feed update on Bangladesh in December 2024, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) said wheat acreage and production have been stagnant for several years.

It cited that this was due to a lack of improved seed varieties, disease and pest infestations during cultivation as well as competition with other profitable crops during the same season.

The DAE's estimate showed that both maize and potato area has increased this fiscal year as farmers switched to the crops.

Winter maize acreage gained 4 percent year-on-year to 5.66 lakh hectares in the current FY25 from the previous year.

And encouraged by record high prices of potato last year, farmers cultivated potato on 5.24 lakh hectares in FY25, the highest on record, up 14 percent year-on-year, according to the DAE estimate.

Amzad Hossain, another farmer of Farabari village in Thakurgaon upazila, another major area for wheat cultivation, said he cultivated potatoes on two bighas of land and maize on three bighas this season.

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29 IIG operators still owe Tk 205cr to BTRC

MAHMUDUL HASAN

A total of 29 international internet gateway (IIG) service providers in Bangladesh still owe the country's telecom regulator about Tk 205 crore collectively even though the monthlong window to clear their dues has long passed.

These dues include regular payments, such as undisclosed bandwidth charges and contributions to the Social Obligation Fund, according to the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC).

Official documents, dated December 16 and 17, show that the BTRC had instructed 30 local IIG service providers to clear payments amounting to Tk 220 crore by January 18.

However, just 15 of them have since issued payments amounting to roughly Tk 15 crore.

Level-3 Carrier Limited contributed the most with Tk 10.81 crore while only Coronet Corporation Limited managed to completely clear its dues of Tk 3 lakh.

The top five defaulters account for more than 77 percent of the outstanding sum.

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Bangladesh Telecommunications Company Limited (BTCL) owes the most with Tk 51.58 crore followed by Aamra Technologies with Tk 25.48 crore, Earth Telecom with Tk 32.02 crore, Level-3 Carrier with Tk 11.21 crore, Peerex Networks with Tk 15.99 crore, Windstream Communication with Tk 11.48 crore, and Delta Infocom with Tk 10.59 crore.

The BTCL, a state-run telecommunications service and infrastructure company, has not paid any of its dues and is yet to provide a response for failing to do so.

The other companies that have not sent a reply include Novocom, Bangladesh Submarine Cables, REGO Communications, 1 Asia Alliance Communication, and Planet Internet Gateway.

Seven companies, namely Aamra, BdHub, Mango, Virgo, Global Fair, Intraglobe and Maxnet Online, have applied to pay their dues in instalments.

Aamra Technologies, with an outstanding balance of Tk 15.48 crore, has requested the withdrawal of a cap on their bandwidth sales in exchange for a down payment of Tk 1 crore, with the remaining dues to be paid in 36 monthly instalments.

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Gold dips on profit-taking

REUTERS

Gold prices fell over 1 percent on Friday due to profit-taking, although they remained poised for their seventh straight weekly rise, driven by fears of a global trade war in the wake of US President Donald Trump's push for reciprocal tariffs.

Spot gold fell 1.6 percent to \$2,882.99 an ounce as of 01:40 p.m. ET (1840 GMT), but remained on track for a weekly gain of 0.8 percent. Bullion hit a record peak of \$2,942.70 on Tuesday. US gold futures settled 1.5 percent lower at \$2,900.70.

"There are some technical factors in play; the inability to get the all-time high set on Tuesday leaves a potential double top, and we see some profit-taking ahead of the weekend," said Peter Grant, vice president and senior metals strategist at Zaner Metals.

There is still a bullish trend in gold driven by several factors like tariffs, underlying inflation, and a weaker U.S. dollar, with a growing shift from paper to physical gold further fuelling this trend, said Alex Ebkarian, chief operating officer at Allegiance Gold.

On Thursday Trump directed his economic team to formulate plans for reciprocal tariffs on every country that imposes taxes on U.S. imports. This potentially inflationary move could drive further safe-haven demand for gold, a traditional hedge against rising prices and geopolitical uncertainty.

Meanwhile, US retail sales dropped by the most in nearly two years in January, suggesting a sharp slowdown in economic growth early in the first quarter.

Southeast Bank signs MoU with Sikder Insurance

Southeast Bank's Managing Director Nuruddin Md Sadeque Hossain and Sikder Insurance Company's Managing Director and CEO Sk Abdur Rafique exchange documents after signing a payroll banking deal in Dhaka recently. PHOTO: SOUTHEAST BANK

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Southeast Bank PLC has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Sikder Insurance Company Limited to provide tailored banking solutions to the insurer's employees.

Nuruddin Md Sadeque Hossain, managing director of Southeast Bank, and Sk Abdur Rafique, managing director and CEO of Sikder Insurance Company Limited, exchanged the agreement on behalf of their respective organisations, according to a press release.

Employees of Sikder Insurance Company Limited will now receive their salaries and other banking benefits through Southeast Bank's payroll banking service.

Besides, the bank's corporate payment module will enable seamless fund transfers, vendor payments, and other corporate financial transactions.

Nuruddin Md Sadeque Hossain said, "We are pleased to partner with Sikder Insurance Company Limited. Our collaboration reflects our commitment to offering innovative banking solutions that enhance operational efficiency and financial management for corporate clients. We look forward to a fruitful and long-term partnership."

Masum Uddin Khan, deputy managing director of Southeast Bank, and other senior officials from both organisations were also present.

Japan to release emergency rice reserves to fight inflation

AFP, *Tokyo*

The Japanese government said Friday it will release a fifth of its emergency rice stockpile after hot weather, poor harvests and panic buying over a "megaquake" warning nearly doubled prices over a year.

Japan has previously tapped into its reserves to cope with disasters, but this marked the first time since the stockpile was built in 1995 that it was doing so because of supply chain problems.

Some supermarket shelves were emptied in August of rice following a week-long holiday, a series of typhoons and warnings of a looming major earthquake that has so far failed to materialise.

The government had initially hoped prices would stabilise late last year once newly harvested rice arrived in stores, but inflation continued unabated, this time because some distributors were hoarding for fear of running out.

Agriculture Minister Taku Eto told reporters on Friday the government will release 210,000 tonnes of rice from its stock of one million tonnes.

"I hope you will take this as our strong determination to improve at all costs the situation where distribution has been delayed and stuck," he said.

Agriculture Minister Taku Eto told reporters on Friday the government will release 210,000 tonnes of rice from its stock of one million tonnes

Rice prices had already begun to change consumption patterns for some like Tokyo resident Eriko Kato.

"I still do buy rice occasionally, but since it's so expensive I sometimes give up on buying it once I see the price," Kato, 41, told AFP.

A five-kilogramme (11-pound) bag was retailing at 3,688 yen (\$24) in the last week of January, according to a government survey, up from 2,023 yen last year. The law for the government to stockpile the grain was enacted in 1995 after a major rice crop failure two years earlier sent shoppers scrambling to buy the staple.

Masayuki Ogawa, assistant professor at Utsunomiya University, told AFP that a series of factors had contributed to the current crisis.

Among them is the tourism boom and shortage triggered by the extreme heat in 2023 -- joint record hottest summer.

The crisis was exacerbated by distributors that were believed to be hoarding in hopes of cashing in later, he said.

"It's suspected that some distributors are trying to make a profit, waiting for the price hike," he explained.

But he estimates the price increase could stop if these distributors are forced to release their rice after the government's move.

The reserve release is "a complicated operation," as government intervention could impact the stability of rice production and producers' earnings in the long term, he said.

To prevent the distorting effect, the government is required to buy back the same amount of rice it released within a year.

NCC Bank to install CRMs at metro rail stations

Mohammad Abdur Rouf, managing director of Dhaka Mass Transit Company Ltd (DMTCL), and M Shamsul Arefin, managing director of NCC Bank, pose for photographs at an agreement signing programme at DMTCL office in Dhaka recently. PHOTO: NCC BANK

STAR BUSINESS DESK

NCC Bank has signed an agreement with Dhaka Mass Transit Company Ltd (DMTCL) to install cash recycler machines (CRMs), self-service terminals that allow customers to deposit and withdraw cash, at all stations of the Dhaka Metro Rail.

Khondaker Ehteshamul Kabir, company secretary of DMTCL, and Md Zakir Anam, deputy managing director of NCC Bank, signed the agreement on behalf of their respective organisations, according to a press release.

Mohammad Abdur Rouf, managing director of DMTCL, and M Shamsul Arefin, managing director of NCC Bank, were also present.

Arefin said that the metro rail has not only transformed Dhaka's transportation landscape but also unlocked significant business opportunities. As metro stations evolve into bustling commercial centres with the opening of shops, business centres, and malls, the need for convenient and secure financial services continues to grow.

In response to this increasing demand, NCC Bank and other financial institutions have strategically partnered with DMTCL to install ATM booths at metro stations, he added.

DMTCL Managing Director Rouf thanked NCC Bank and other signatory banks for their initiatives, saying that this collaboration marks a significant step towards enhancing commuter convenience and advancing a smart, cashless public transportation system.

Among others, Mohammad Tariqul Amin, EVP; Zobair Mahmood Fahim, SVP and head of Retail & DFS Business; Shahin Akter Nuha, head of Transaction Banking & Cash Management Department at NCC Bank; and other officials from both organisations were also present.

Union Bank holds managers' conference

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Union Bank PLC recently held its "Annual Manager's Conference-2025" at the bank's head office in Dhaka's Gulshan area.

Md Fariduddin Ahmad, chairman of the bank's board of directors, attended the conference as the chief guest, according to a press release.

Ahmad said Union Bank should continue to set a unique example of service excellence and business success both at home and abroad.

He added that by gaining more customer trust and offering customer-friendly services, the bank should strive to become the best in the country.

The conference discussed in detail the bank's deposits, investments, foreign trade, expatriate income and other ongoing issues.

Chairman of the Audit Committee Sheikh Zahidul Islam, Independent Director and Member of the Risk Management Committee Md Shahidul Islam Zahid, and Members of the Shariah Supervisory Committee Mufti Md Anwar Hosain Molla and Professor ANM Rashid Ahmed joined the programme virtually.

Shafiuddin Ahmed, managing director of the bank, presided over the conference.

Union Bank's Chairman Md Fariduddin Ahmad attends the "Annual Manager's Conference-2025" at the bank's head office in Gulshan, Dhaka recently. PHOTO: UNION BANK

No well-thought-out urban planning

FROM PAGE B4

We cannot design buildings either because we are not clear which rules we should follow."

The devaluation of the taka due to the dollar crisis has further complicated the situation. The import costs of construction raw materials have soared, as have prices of apartments and commercial spaces.

"Our construction costs go up whenever the price of the dollar increases," he said. "We sell flats upfront. So, cost escalation is a big challenge for us."

The number of buyers is declining due to the rise in apartment prices.

The market situation deteriorated further after the political changeover in August last year.

"Fresh bookings slumped by half after August amid political uncertainty. People seem very cautious. The situation may normalise after the national elections and the stabilisation of dollar rates. People feel comfortable during political stability," he said.

"However, our existence will be at stake if the cost of dollars rises," said Karim.

Trump keeps tariffs

FROM PAGE B4

The US, though, collects a 25 percent tariff on highly profitable imported pickup trucks.

"We applaud President Trump's idea to look at all vehicle imports to the U.S., an important step forward," Ford Motor Co Chief Executive Jim Farley said on X after Trump's remarks. "Comprehensive trade policies are imperative to achieving the president's vision to strengthen the US auto industry."

Earlier in the week Farley said Trump's proposed and implemented tariffs have added "a lot of cost and a lot of chaos."

According to auto data collector Ward's Intelligence, close to a quarter of new vehicles sold in the U.S. last year were classified as imported, which in their data excludes vehicles built in the U.S., Canada or Mexico. The trade pact for the North American trading partners that Trump revamped in his first term, the US-Canada-Mexico Agreement, or USMCA, lays out extensive rules of origin for the parts included in vehicles built in the three countries.

All vehicles determined to have at least 75 percent of their parts originating from the three countries are not subject to tariffs.

USMCA is up for a scheduled review in 2026, and a number of analysts view Trump's comments on tariffs on vehicles and Canadian and Mexican goods as an opening bid to renegotiate a pact he described as the "greatest" trade deal ever.

"We have not seen any details at this time. Ford, GM and Stellantis continue to believe that vehicles and auto parts that meet the USMCA requirements should not be subject to additional tariffs," said Matt Blunt, president of the American Automotive Policy Council, which represents the interests of Ford, General Motors and Stellantis.

Trump's directive on Thursday required his top economic advisers to draw up plans to impose like-for-like tariffs on goods from any country that collects an import tax on U.S. goods. His nominee to run the Commerce Department, Howard Lutnick, said he expected those reviews to be completed and submitted to Trump by April 1.

Global stocks buffeted by tariff threats and data

AFP, *New York*

Stock markets diverged and the dollar dipped on Friday as traders tracked US President Donald Trump's latest tariff announcement, economic data and earnings.

Wall Street indices were mixed at the end of the session with the S&P 500 near flat.

That came despite data showing that US retail sales fell by a more-than-expected 0.9 percent in January from December.

Analysts pointed out that was due in part to the December figure being revised higher.

The drop was due partly to bad weather that depressed demand, but the result could also show "a little consumer fatigue," said Briefing.com analyst Patrick O'Hare.

Investors largely shrugged at data earlier this week showing an increase in consumer price inflation and higher-than-expected wholesale price inflation.

"The stock market continues to maintain this resilient disposition," said O'Hare, who pointed to strong corporate earnings as an offset to concerns about tariffs and an uptick in inflation.

But a rebound in inflation, or persistent inflation at a high level, would make it difficult for the Federal Reserve to cut rates further.

Markets also continued to follow the latest trade developments.

The European Union on Friday vowed to respond "firmly and immediately" to trade barriers after Trump unveiled tariffs that could hit US allies and competitors.

Trump on Thursday said he had decided to impose reciprocal duties, in a dramatic escalation of an international trade war he has unleashed since taking office in January, but the measures will not go into effect until a study is completed.

Despite rising trade tensions, investor sentiment has largely held up in the hope that many of the tariffs can be rowed back with negotiations, while Trump's announcement of plans to hold Ukraine peace talks with Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin has added some optimism.

"Tariff ambiguity still reigns but markets are currently drawing some comfort from the news" of the delay, said National Australia Bank's head of currencies research and markets, Ray Attrill.

Hong Kong led the way among major stock markets on Friday, closing up more than three percent, as tech firms extended their recent surge on a Bloomberg report that China had invited Alibaba co-founder Jack Ma and other top entrepreneurs to meet Beijing's top brass.

That fueled hopes of fresh support for the private sector.

Automation boosts Barishal's salt processing

SUSHANTA GHOSH

The use of automatic machines has increased processed salt production by 25 percent in Barishal, while improved efficiency has turned Jhalakathi district in the division into a manufacturing hub.

The shift from traditional manual methods to modern centrifuge machines has tripled production capacity in some factories, said Mohammad Ali Azgar, deputy manager of the Jhalakathi office of the Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC).

Additionally, training programmes aimed at enhancing worker efficiency have also played a significant role, he said.

At present, around two-thirds of the division's processed salt factories are located in and around Jhalakathi, thanks to the convenient river transport facilities and the existence of a century-old tradition of salt processing.

According to BSCIC Jhalakathi, there are 12 salt processing factories in Barishal division, eight of which are situated in Jhalakathi.

Three of the eight factories have adopted automatic machines, resulting in a threefold increase in salt production, said Mohammad Al Amin, an officer at BSCIC Jhalakathi.

"Several others are in the process of upgrading their machinery."

The majority of the salt produced in Barishal is used in tanneries and dried fish processing units, with a smaller portion being processed for edible consumption, he said.

Currently, the eight salt processing factories in Jhalakathi employ around 300 to 400 permanent workers, with an additional 1,000 to 1,200 temporary ones depending on the industry.

Barishal division produces around 3,800 tonnes of industrial salt, of which 3,200 tonnes come from Jhalakathi, he said.

PHOTO: TITU DAS

Around two-thirds of Barishal division's processed salt factories are located in and around Jhalakathi, thanks to convenient river transport facilities.

The entire 900 tonnes of edible salt produced in Barishal annually comes from Jhalakathi, Amin said.

A major portion of the salt is supplied to leather factories and dried fish processing hubs, particularly in Bhola and Patuakhali, where the demand for coarse or locally produced salt is high, he said.

Raw salt is transported via trawlers from Kutubdia and Chattogram, where it is refined and packaged for distribution.

Every 50-kg bag of industrial salt is sold at Tk 630, while a 25-kg edible salt bag is priced at Tk 370, traders said.

Anup Kumar Sarker, manager of New Jhalakathi Salt Industries, one of the factories that have installed modern centrifuge machines, said monthly production in his factory increased to 60 tonnes after installing a centrifuge machine in 2018, whereas it was below 20 tonnes under the manual system.

Mohammad Liyon, owner of ARS Salt Industries, said he started using automatic machines six years ago.

"My factory operates at full capacity for six months, but production slows during the rest of the year due to a shortage of crude salt from Kutubdia and Maheshkhali."

Liyon said automation had boosted production in his factory by 25 to 30 percent.

Humaun Kabir, owner of Lucky Salt Industries, said he has initiated plans to set up a modern mini-auto factory, as manual salt production is no longer profitable.

Modernisation will significantly impact local salt manufacturing, which began in the area during the British era, according to Chitta Dutta, a veteran resident.

Automation is expected to enhance employment opportunities in the region, he said.

Ramadan on the horizon

FROM PAGE B1

Now, the supply shortage is forcing consumers to rummage from store to store for soybean oil, a commodity for which Bangladesh relies heavily on imports to meet its annual requirement of 24 lakh tonnes.

According to official data, the price of bottled soybean oil per litre is now Tk 175 to Tk 176, reflecting a nearly 1 percent increase over the past month and a 2.33 percent increase over the past year, according to retail price data compiled by the state-run Trading Corporation of Bangladesh.

Nurul Alam Shikdar, a retailer in the Pallabi Extension area of Mirpur, said yesterday, "On February 10, I received only 10 percent of the bottled soybean oil I required for my shop. Today (February 15), the situation remains the same – there has been no increase in supply."

"The supply has improved somewhat in the last seven days," said Firoj Alam, deputy general manager of Daily Shopping grocery store, which has 75 outlets across the country.

However, the supply has not reached the expected level yet, he said, adding that they placed an order for 5,000 bottles of five-litre soybean oil at the end of last week, but received only 1,200 bottles.

Abu Bakar Siddique, a wholesaler at Karwan Bazar, said, "A week ago, I used to get one-fourth of the edible oil I demanded from dealers. But now, I'm not even getting that. The supply has decreased even further."

Abul Hashem, an edible oil wholesaler in Moulvibazar, one of the major wholesale commodity markets in the capital, said he had received only 25 percent of his demand, which has now risen to about 50 percent.

However, he added that there were still no signs of the edible oil market returning to normal within the timeframe promised by the adviser.

A wholesale trader from Khatunganj, Chattogram, who has been in the business for 24 years, said that despite the commerce adviser's remarks, there had been no improvement in the supply situation of bottled soybean oil in the market.

He mentioned that dealers had supplied him with only 5 to 10 percent of his demand previously, and the situation remained the same.

Taslim Shahriar, senior assistant general manager at Meghna Group of Industries, a commodity importer and processor marketing the Fresh brand of edible oil, said an import-laden ship would arrive at Chattogram's port by February 25.

As such, the edible oil supply situation is expected to be resolved between March 5 and 6, he added.

The Daily Star also approached Mustafa Haider, group director of TK Group, a leading importer and commodity processor marketing the Pushti brand, for comment. However, he did not respond to calls or messages.

The reporter also tried to contact Biswajit Saha, director of corporate and regulatory affairs at City Group, which markets the Teer brand of edible oil. However, he did not respond to calls.

Atia Sultana, deputy director for operations at the Directorate of National Consumers' Right Protection (DNCRP), said the DNCRP had organised a stakeholder meeting today at its headquarters to review the latest updates on edible oil, ensure price stability, and maintain a steady supply.

SM Nazer Hossain, vice-president of the Consumers Association of Bangladesh, told The Daily Star that if the government had taken the proper initiatives, the problem would have been solved within seven days.

"They know where the issue lies. However, despite knowing the problem, they have not taken the necessary steps," he added.

29 IIG operators still owe Tk 205cr

FROM PAGE B1

But although the BTRC previously issued multiple instructions to Aamra Technologies to pay its dues in instalments, the company has so far failed to comply.

As Aamra Technologies' IIG license will expire on April 2027, giving the company just 28 months to renew its approval, the request to pay all dues through 36 instalments is unreasonable, the BTRC said.

The company's operational activities are fully suspended at present.

BdHub Limited has applied to pay Tk 0.49 crore through six monthly instalments for undisclosed bandwidth dues and asked to waive the delay fee of Tk 0.66 crore.

Mango Teleservices Limited has requested permission to pay the dues owed as of September 2024 within the next 15 days.

Virgo Communication Limited has requested to pay Tk 0.10 crore of its regular fees by the end of February, with the remaining amount to be settled through 15 monthly instalments.

The company also requested to settle its undisclosed bandwidth dues in two phases, with 50 percent to be paid by February and the rest by April.

Global Fair Communication Limited has requested to settle its full outstanding dues through 30 monthly instalments.

Intraglobe Communication Limited has requested to pay its dues in one month while Maxnet Online has sought three instalments and Velocity Network asked to make payments in stages.

Currently, the outstanding amount for undisclosed bandwidth charges is Tk 90.52 crore.

Six companies -- Delta, Maxhub, Startrek, Exabyte, Cybergate, and ADN Telecom -- have requested corrections to accounts for undisclosed bandwidth charges as it is not listed in the guidelines and also considering how the accounts are allegedly erroneous.

Peerex Networks Limited, after filing a writ petition, has obtained a three-month stay order from the court on the BTRC's letter.

Fiber@Home Global Limited, with outstanding VAT charges of Tk 5.90 crore, mentioned that a writ regarding its VAT payments is in court, and indicated that further action will be taken accordingly, as per BTRC documents.

The company has agreed to pay for revenue sharing, excluding VAT, until the court's decision is made.

The telecom regulator recently decided to hold meetings with the IIG operators to clarify the issue of undisclosed bandwidth charges.

It also decided to send letters to the IIG companies that have not paid regular dues, granting them a ten-day deadline to do so.

Aminul Hakim, president of the International Internet Gateway Association of Bangladesh, said some of the bandwidth acquired by IIGs remains unsold while a portion is allocated to maintaining traffic flow.

"But the BTRC's calculations for undisclosed bandwidth have not accounted for these factors," he added.

Hakim also said that the telecom regulator determines its dues for revenue sharing based on a fixed selling price that far exceeds the market rate.

"So, we have urged them to reconsider this," he added.

Wheat acreage lowest on record

FROM PAGE B1

"However, just two to three years ago, I used to cultivate wheat on all this land," he said.

Bangladesh produced 11.72 lakh tonnes of wheat in FY24. The nation's average wheat production has been roughly 11 lakh tonnes for the last seven years, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS).

The USDA said Bangladesh's local production accounts for 15 percent of the total demand, forecasted at 77 lakh tonnes for the current FY25. The rest is imported.

Wheat planting in Bangladesh begins in early December and harvesting takes place in the March-April period the following year.

Md Abdul Hakim, principal scientific officer and head of the wheat breeding division of the Bangladesh Wheat and Maize Research Institute (BWMRI), said it was crop competition in which wheat was losing.

"This year's acreage is the lowest in history. You will see potatoes on miles after miles of fields where wheat was grown last year. You cannot imagine. Many small farmers have planted potato even by borrowing," he added.

Hakim said Panchagarh and Thakurgaon were major wheat cultivation areas. However, maize acreage has declined drastically in the greater Dinajpur district, he said.

"On the other hand, we have seen higher wheat acreage in Rajshahi, Jashore, and the greater Kushtia districts," he said.

Wasim Royal, a resident in Darshana upazila of the western district of Chuadanga, said acreage of the grain increased this year in his area because there was no pest infestation in the wheat crop cultivated by farmers last year.

In 2016, wheat blast struck the crop fields in southwestern Bangladesh in its first outbreak in Asia.

The disease affected over 1 lakh hectares of area, costing the country a financial loss of at least Tk 1,800 crore in terms of lost yields in that year, according to experts.

"Wheat was almost out in our area because of blast disease. The crop has returned to our area," Royal added.

GDP may cross

FROM PAGE B1

Dialogue (CPD), underscored the need for the national statistical agency to re-estimate the GDP size.

"Many reports, including the 'White Paper on the State of the Bangladesh Economy', have identified flaws in the BBS's GDP growth estimates," he said.

As a result, the actual tax-GDP ratio and debt-GDP ratio cannot be accurately accounted for, added Rahman.

"First, the BBS should develop a robust methodology for calculating GDP," he emphasised.

Eurozone economy grew by 0.1% in Q4

AFP, *Brussels*

The eurozone economy grew by 0.1 percent in the fourth quarter, official data showed Friday, a welcome revision after preliminary figures showed growth slowed to a halt.

The data was unchanged for annual growth for 2024 at 0.7 percent in the 20-country single currency area, according to the Eurostat statistics agency.

No well-thought-out urban planning in the past 50 years

Says Credence Housing's managing director

SOHEL PARVEZ

Bangladesh is growing horizontally and vertically, with new multistoried complexes being erected on fresh land in suburbs and towns to replace more modest structures.

Demand for homes and commercial spaces is rising hand in hand with the growing population of this land-scarce country, which accommodates over 1,300 people per square kilometre, making it one of the most densely populated nations in the world.

However, the development has not been planned. This is the case not only in the capital Dhaka but also outside the metropolis.

"We saw some plans regarding Dhaka during the Pakistan period. However, no proper planning was done after the independence. We have not had any long-term goal to make Dhaka a livable city," said Zillul Karim, managing director of Credence Housing Ltd.

During the pre-liberation period, areas such as Dhanmondi and Mohammadpur were developed in a planned manner.

Since then, only the Purbachal and Uttara areas have been developed in a planned manner. Of those, Purbachal has yet to become livable. Other than that, no well-thought-out plan has been made in the past 50 years.

"In parallel, we have made Bangladesh totally centralised," Karim added, referring to the overcrowded state of the capital. At the time of the independence in 1971, Dhaka had a population of only 700,000. Now, it is home to nearly 2.5 crore.

"We could not ensure industrialisation in any part of the country except Dhaka. Now, everyone is coming to Dhaka although we have no idea whether the capital can bear the load."

The authorities could have developed cities like Khulna, thereby ensuring facilities and jobs and preventing people from feeling compelled to move to the capital for better opportunities.

Instead, Khulna, a city blessed with a seaport and the Sundarbans, has become almost lifeless.

Not only do young people flock to Dhaka for career opportunities after graduation but politicians and businessmen also aim to ultimately reach the capital.

Zillul Karim

"Everything is centred around Dhaka. But how much load can it bear? Problems will not be solved if you don't think about the whole country."

Karim, who has been engaged in the real estate sector for nearly two decades, said Bangladesh needs to grow vertically in a bid to preserve land, which can be used for farming to ensure food security for the growing population.

"We have no option but to go for vertical growth. Just think about the fact that we have to import green chillies. If we lose our farmland, there will be no crops."

Many of our problems could be solved by vertical expansion, but the government has to provide infrastructural support for this, he added.

Karim highlighted that roughly 90 percent of people in Dhaka live in rented houses.

"We are unable to ensure homes for a majority of people in Dhaka."

One of the reasons for that is the high property prices in Dhaka. There is a huge demand for apartments at prices between Tk 50 lakh and Tk 1 crore.

"But we are totally missing this group. This is a big group. They are willing to purchase, but they do not have the capability to buy homes in the capital."

He said they can offer a flat at Tk 50 lakh in Savar.

"But a person whose office is in Karwan Bazar and whose son studies at Dhanmondi Boys' School will not move to Savar because no smooth communication facilities have been ensured for that person.

"Is there a reliable public transport that could take him to Dhanmondi in half an hour? If there were such infrastructures, there would have been development in Savar."

Everyone wants to stay in Dhaka, where traffic jams have made all the problems more complicated, he lamented.

One option could be housing developments surrounding the capital. But a lack of good public transport, and the absence of good educational institutions, healthcare, and other amenities there pose major barriers.

"We need a long-term plan, taking the whole country into perspective, not Dhaka only. We must give equal priority to every divisional city, ensuring everything that citizens need, so that no one feels the urgency to come to Dhaka.

"Had all the facilities been available in districts like Khulna or Dinajpur, who would come to Dhaka?" he said. "Just think, a person has to be brought to Dhaka in case of cardiac arrest. There is no good medical facility that treats heart disease in most other areas."

To address these issues, public-private initiatives are needed.

Karim also highlighted policy problems, saying: "The sad part is that we have no proper township planning."

Real estate development in Dhaka slowed after the government framed a detailed area plan (DAP) in 2022. Landowners are not willing to give land for new buildings since the floor area ratio has been reduced, he said.

This has fueled land prices and, in turn, the prices of flats.

He said they have been waiting for a revision in the DAP for nearly six months, but there has been no progress in this regard.

"As a result, we cannot take on new projects, and three or four departments in our office are sitting idle.

READ MORE ON B2

Resourcing a resource-hungry country

MAMUN RASHID

Bangladesh's higher education system faces a critical issue: While universities are expanding rapidly, an increasing number of degree-holding graduates are struggling to find meaningful employment because employers cannot find graduates with the necessary skills.

The root of this problem lies in the "skills gap." Universities continue teaching outdated curricula while employers seek graduates with practical, job-specific skills. Graduates often lack soft skills like effective teamwork, problem-solving and professional communication. As industries such as digital marketing, IT, and artificial intelligence surge, the gap between academic education and real-world requirements grows. Yet traditional degree programs remain focused on theoretical knowledge, leaving students unprepared for modern fields.

However, this issue is not limited to universities. To fix the broken system, change must begin at schools, where we get to shape young minds. To truly prepare them, we need to rethink teachers are trained. Educators must be trained in effective pedagogies that encourage critical thinking and creativity. For instance, the Montessori method emphasises child-led learning, encouraging independence and problem-solving. Our educators should be equipped with such skills to ensure that the foundations of learning are built on strong, practical and adaptable methods.

Demographically, Bangladesh holds an advantage, with nearly 30 percent of its population aged between 15 and 29. This youth bulge could fuel the country's economic growth. However, many graduates remain frustrated by their inability to find jobs, leading to increasing migration. If this trend continues, the country risks losing an entire generation of talent.

Germany offers a useful example through its "dual education system." This model combines academic education with practical work experience, where students split their time between classrooms and businesses. By graduation, they have real-world experience and valuable industry connections. Bangladesh would greatly benefit from such a model. Countries like Vietnam and the Philippines are already investing heavily in skill-oriented education. These countries are also strengthening ties between schools, universities, and industries, ensuring that graduates are better prepared for the evolving job market.

Some Bangladeshi universities are starting to recognise the need for change. Institutions like BRAC and North South University have begun partnerships with businesses to offer research opportunities, internships and mentorship programs. So, considering how these efforts are improving job outcomes for their graduates, a more widespread, national-level transformation is required to see an actual impact.

Despite the growth of inbound remittances, it would be far more sustainable for the country to develop high-quality jobs. By investing in a seamless education-to-industry pipeline, Bangladesh could position itself as a regional talent hub. This would reduce brain drain and cultivate a workforce that is better equipped to meet the demands of the economy.

To address the quality of education, Bangladesh must overhaul its curricula and improve collaboration between educational institutions and industries. This needs to start with schools, ensuring that children are taught by qualified educators skilled in modern teaching methods. Universities should integrate internships into their programs, allowing students to gain practical experience. Also, teachers should get exposure to the private sector to stay informed about industry requirements. Finally, forming university-industry councils would ensure that academic programs are designed with input from employers, ensuring graduates are job-ready.

The success of Bangladesh's economy over the next two decades hinges on whether its education system evolves quickly enough. If reforms are not implemented, a generation of young Bangladeshis may find that their degrees carry little weight, which would be the real crisis.

The author is chairman of Financial Excellence Limited

Russia sharply raises inflation forecast

AFP, *Moscow*

Russia's central bank sharply raised its inflation forecast for 2025 on Friday, warning there was no sign rocketing price increases would go into reverse.

Inflation has been rising fast across the Russian economy for months, driven by massive government spending on the Ukraine conflict and deep labour shortages.

Prices are now expected to go up between seven to eight percent this year, compared with an earlier forecast for 2025 of between 4.5 to five percent, the central bank said in a statement.

This is despite a rally in the value of the ruble this week after presidents Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin held a phone call, raising hopes of a thaw in US-Russian relations.

Annual inflation ticked up to 9.9 percent year-on-year in January, compared with 9.5 percent in December, according to the Rosstat statistics service.

The central bank held borrowing costs at a two-decade high of 21 percent on Friday, despite complaints from businesses and banks that the high key rate is hurting economic growth.

"Price pressures remain significant," central bank governor Elvira Nabiullina told a press conference after the rate announcement. Nabiullina cautioned fast price increases would persist, despite a "slight slowdown" in inflation data at the start of the year.

Brazil hints at WTO complaint after Trump steel tariffs

Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva PHOTO: AFP

REUTERS, *Sao Paulo*

President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva said on Friday that Brazil would react to US President Donald Trump's decision to issue tariffs on steel imports, suggesting his government could file a complaint at the World Trade Organization, or tax US products.

"I hear they are now going to tax Brazilian steel. If they do it, we will react commercially, either by filing a complaint to the WTO or taxing products we import from them," Lula said in a radio interview.

The South American country is one of the largest sources of US steel imports. Trump earlier this week substantially raised tariffs on steel and aluminum imports to a flat 25% "without exceptions or exemptions".

Lula's remarks point to a more aggressive approach to the tariffs than his economic team had suggested in previous statements. Both his finance and trade ministers called for dialogue and potential negotiations with the United States.

The White House in a fact sheet on Thursday - when Trump moved to scrap decades-old low tariff rates, raising them to match those of other countries - also pointed to Brazil's ethanol tariffs as an example of unfair trade practices.

Lula said he wants Brazil's relations with the US to be "harmonious" and noted the two countries have balanced trade, but added: "If there is any action against Brazil, there will be reciprocity."

The US has run a trade surplus with Latin America's largest economy since 2008, which reached $253 million last year on more than $80 billion of bilateral trade.

The Brazilian leader said he was worried about Trump's "protectionism", saying it goes against the United States' long-standing defense of free markets.

Trump keeps tariffs drumbeat going, with autos targeted next

REUTERS, *New York*

President Donald Trump on Friday kept alive his drumbeat of tariff threats, saying levies on automobiles would be coming as soon as April 2, the day after members of his cabinet are due to deliver reports to him outlining options for a range of import duties as he seeks to reshape global trade.

"Maybe around April 2," Trump said in response to a question about when auto tariffs might be coming, during an executive-order signing session in the Oval Office. "I would have done them on April 1... But we're going to do it on April 2."

It was the latest in a litany of trade actions Trump has unveiled since taking office for the second time on January 20.

Since his inauguration, he has imposed a 10 percent tariff on all imports from China, on top of existing levies; announced and then delayed for a month 25 percent tariffs on goods from Mexico and non-energy imports from Canada; set a March 12 start date for 25 percent tariffs on all imported steel and aluminum; and on Thursday directed his economics team to devise plans for reciprocal tariffs on every country that taxes U.S. imports.

It has been a blur of orders that Trump has asserted will level the playing field for American goods abroad and reinvigorate a long-declining U.S. manufacturing base but which have also sown confusion among businesses, irked long-standing U.S. allies and stoked worries among consumers and economists about a renewed upswing in inflation.

"We applaud President Trump's idea to look at all vehicle imports to the US, an important step forward," Ford Motor Co Chief Executive Jim Farley said

Trump offered no other details for his auto tariff intentions before heading to his Florida estate for the weekend. But what he views as unfair treatment of US automotive exports in foreign markets has long been a sore spot for him. The European Union, for instance, collects a 10 percent tariff on vehicle imports, four times the US passenger car tariff rate of 2.5 percent.

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Cars are stacked ready to be loaded onto a ship for export at the port in Taicang, in China's eastern Jiangsu province. President Donald Trump said levies on automobiles would be coming as soon as April 2. PHOTO: AFP/FILE