Mobile subscribers rise by 10 lakh in May

Driven by GP, Robi gains

MAHMUDUL HASAN

The number of mobile subscribers in Bangladesh grew by 10 lakh in May, driven primarily by net additions from the country's two largest operators, Grameenphone and Robi Axiata.

With the increase, total mobile subscriptions reached 18.76 crore at the end of May, according to data released by the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC).

The growth marks a modest rebound following several months of decline. Between July 2023 and March 2024, the industry shed nearly 1 crore subscribers, largely due to higher taxes on new SIMs.

The BTRC defines an active subscriber as a biometrically verified user who has made a call, used mobile data, or sent an SMS at least once in the previous 90 days.

Grameenphone, the largest telecom operator in the country, added 7 lakh subscribers in May, pushing its total to 8.61 crore.

The operator now commands 45.93 percent of the total mobile subscriber market.

PHOTO: STAR/FILE

Robi Axiata, the second-largest operator, gained 3 lakh new customers during the same period, bringing its total to nearly 5.70 crore.

Robi's market share now stands at 30.37 percent.

Meanwhile, Banglalink saw a decline of 1.2 lakh subscribers, bringing its total customer base to 3.78 crore.

The operator's current market share is 20.18 percent.

State-owned Teletalk, on the other hand, added 20,000 new subscribers in May, taking its total to 65.8 lakh.

Teletalk holds a 3.51 percent share of the market.

Industry executives attribute the earlier contraction in the subscriber base to the rise in supplementary duty on new SIM cards.

Shahed Alam, chief corporate and regulatory officer of Robi, said the tax rose from Tk 200 to Tk 300.

"We are subsidising SIM sales again," he said.

"Due to the high taxation, it was difficult for smaller operators to offer subsidies, which negatively impacted our growth. As a result, while the top operator, which has far superior financial might, was gaining, our customer base was shrinking," he added.

Taimur Rahman, chief corporate and regulatory affairs officer of Banglalink, said, "The increased SIM tax makes it very difficult for smaller mobile operators to subsidise SIMs as heavily as they did in the past."

However, the market has shown signs of a gradual rebound since April.

Modernising ports for trade competitiveness

M MASRUR REAZ

Bangladesh has entered a new chapter under a fresh political horizon, opening new opportunities for development. With a focus on governance reforms, economic liberalisation, and citizen-centric policies, the country aims to achieve stability and sustainable growth. Trade will remain central to this journey, as it drives inclusive growth and job creation. For a $459 billion economy, exports are critical and must grow further to capture a share of the $33 trillion global trade.

Yet trade competitiveness is held back by inadequate and inefficient port and logistics infrastructure. Poor road, rail and inland waterway links to ports increase transport costs and cause major delays. Logistics costs in Bangladesh reach up to 48 percent in some sectors, far higher than in competing economies. The World Bank estimates that targeted reforms could raise national export earnings by 19 percent, and even a 1 percent cut in logistics costs could lift demand for Bangladeshi exports by up to 7.4 percent. This is even more relevant in the context of the least developed country graduation and growing protectionism in global trade.

At the centre of these logistic challenges is Chattogram port, the country's main trade gateway. Handling 92 percent of seaborne trade and 98 percent of container trade, it faces high berth occupancy, long ship turnaround times, and delays in cargo clearance. These inefficiencies raise trade costs and reduce competitiveness.

The port sector suffers from outdated practices and frameworks. Chattogram port struggles with congestion, delays, high operating costs, environmental concerns and security risks. It ranks 337th out of 405 in the World Bank Container Port Performance Index.

Ships face turnaround times of 3.23 days, compared with 0.86 days in Colombo. Import clearance takes around 11 days, and export border compliance takes about 36 hours.

Bangladesh still follows an outdated port management model that limits efficiency and private engagement. For decades, the Port Authority has been responsible for development, financing, infrastructure and cargo handling. This reflects the "tool port" model, where the authority owns and operates all major equipment and services. By contrast, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka moved to the "landlord port" model in the late 1990s, separating ownership from operations to attract private investment and improve services.

Ports also operate under a tariff structure unchanged since 2008, restricting the ability to invest in expansion and upgrades. The current pricing does not reflect rising trade volumes, service needs or costs. Without updating the tariff, ports cannot generate the revenue needed for modernisation. Operational costs such as labour, maintenance, energy and security have all increased. Without a tariff adjustment, maintaining service quality and safety will be difficult.

While the RMG sector worries that higher tariffs may cut export margins, the main cost pressure lies elsewhere. Shipping lines and intermediaries often charge $150 to $200 per container in local fees, while actual port handling may cost only $50 to $70. These fees often include vague surcharges and documentation charges.

Strategic projects and global best practices offer a way forward. Many countries with complex trade needs have brought in experienced global terminal operators such as PSA International, DP World and APM Terminals. India, Vietnam and the UAE have opened up for not just investment, but also operational expertise. Bangladesh has taken early steps in this direction. The awarding of operations at Patenga Container Terminal and upcoming plans for Bay Terminal are encouraging. Projects like Matarbari Deep Sea Port and Bay Terminal could ease capacity limits and cut shipping costs by up to 15 percent. But without parallel investment in connectivity, warehousing and digital systems, these gains may fall short. Countries like Vietnam and Singapore show that integrating foreign investment, digital platforms and private sector know-how is essential.

The writer is the chairman of Policy Exchange Bangladesh

Walton signs Barbados firm as global distributor

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Walton Hi-Tech Industries PLC has signed a global distributorship agreement with Barbados-based private company Bargain Warehouse Inc to expand its international reach.

Bargain Warehouse will sell, distribute, and market 13 Walton products in 16 territories under a six-year agreement, according to a disclosure published on the Dhaka Stock Exchange (DSE) website yesterday.

Walton, one of the leading electronics manufacturers in Bangladesh, said the deal aims to expand its global footprint and strengthen its international market presence.

However, Walton's net profit declined to around Tk 392 crore in the January–March quarter of fiscal year 2024–25, compared to nearly Tk 422 crore in the same period a year earlier.

As of June 30, 2025, sponsors and directors held 61.09 percent of the company's shares, while institutional investors accounted for 0.60 percent, foreign investors 0.09 percent, and the general public 38.22 percent, as per DSE data.

Precision farming can raise yields by 25%

Dutch scientist says in interview

SUKANTA HALDER

TAKEAWAYS FROM INTERVIEW

- *Rice output per hectare could double with tech*
- *Data-driven methods improve farm efficiency*
- *Fertiliser is often overused without benefit*
- *Affordable tech now within reach for smallholders*
- *Land leasing discourages long-term investment*

Bangladesh can boost crop yields by at least 25 percent through the adoption of modern technology in a cultivation method known as "precision agriculture", according to a Dutch environmental and soil scientist.

Precision agriculture, also known as precision farming or smart farming, is a modern approach to agriculture that uses data, technology, and targeted management to optimise crop production and reduce waste.

It involves collecting information about variables in crop fields, such as soil conditions, weather patterns, and crop health, and then using this data to make informed decisions about resource applications and management.

The country is in a unique position where agricultural production continues to rise—unlike in many countries where growth has plateaued or declined, the scientist said in an interview with The Daily Star recently.

To sustain and optimise this progress, precision agriculture is essential in a country like Bangladesh, said Prof Jetse Stoorvogel of the Department of Environmental Sciences at Open University in the Netherlands.

According to him, Bangladesh's current crop yields, especially in rice, are at just 50 percent of their potential.

"You're often producing 4 tonnes to 5 tonnes per hectare, whereas 10 tonnes could be possible," he pointed out.

Precision agriculture can help close that gap, he added.

If a field has low yield in one section, precision agriculture may help identify whether it needs more fertiliser, said Stoorvogel, who had visited Dhaka in the middle of July.

This approach allows farmers to use resources more efficiently, reduce costs, improve yields, and minimise environmental harm, he added.

It is particularly important for countries like Bangladesh, where food security is a challenge, the population is growing, and agriculture must become more resilient to climate change and market fluctuations, he said.

The scientist said Bangladesh has made some progress, particularly in developing seeds and adopting technological innovations, and that is the starting point of precision agriculture.

While the rest of the world has moved further ahead, Bangladesh still appears to be in the early stages of adopting precision methods, he added.

He said 25 years ago, a soil test cost $200. Today, handheld sensors go for around €100, and subscription-based advisory services on mobiles now make it possible to deliver real-time, customised advice to even the smallest farms, he said.

These tools, along with increasing access to machinery like combine harvesters and mobile-based advisory services, can make precision agriculture accessible to smallholders over time, he said.

In countries like Kenya and India, smallholders are already benefiting from such tools, and the same can happen in Bangladesh, with its growing access to smartphones and mechanisation bridging the knowledge and technology gap.

Another key issue is fertiliser overuse—many Bangladeshi farmers apply more than 300 kilogrammes per hectare, even when yields do not justify it, he said.

Based on soil conditions and crop performance, many farmers could safely reduce fertiliser use by 10 percent to 25 percent, cutting costs and improving environmental outcomes, he added.

READ MORE ON B2

Hopes fade for India-US interim trade deal

REUTERS, *New Delhi*

The prospects of an interim trade deal between India and the United States before Washington's August 1 deadline have dimmed, as talks remain deadlocked over tariff cuts on key agricultural and dairy products, two Indian government sources said.

US President Donald Trump threatened a 26 percent tariff on Indian imports in April but paused implementation to allow for talks. That pause ends on August 1, though India has yet to receive a formal tariff letter, unlike over 20 other countries.

India's trade delegation, led by chief negotiator Rajesh Agrawal, returned from Washington after a fifth round of talks without a breakthrough.

"An interim deal before August 1 looks difficult, though virtual discussions are ongoing," one of the Indian government sources said, adding a US delegation was expected to visit New Delhi soon to continue negotiations.

Talks are stalled as New Delhi is refusing to open its politically-sensitive agriculture and dairy sectors, while Washington is resisting India's demand for relief from higher tariffs on steel, aluminium and autos.

Officials are exploring if these issues can be deferred to a later stage, after an interim deal, the second Indian official said.

Ajay Sahai, director general of the Federation of Indian Export Organisations, warned sectors like gems and jewellery could be hit hard if 26 percent tariffs are imposed.

READ MORE ON B2

Transshipment is the new dirty word of trade

REUTERS, *Hong Kong*

Where is it from? It's one of the top questions customs officials must ask of every shipment, alongside what it is and how much it is worth. Donald Trump's trade war could turn this inquiry on the origin of $3.3 trillion of US goods imports into a quagmire.

The dizzying spread of tariffs the US president is imposing on American trading partners – ranging from a baseline duty of 10 percent secured by the United Kingdom to the threat of a punitive 50 percent charge on imports from Brazil – a large arbitrage. Exporters, particularly in China, have a big incentive to misrepresent where their goods are from.

The president is attempting to counter this risk by saying goods that are "transshipped" through lower-tariff countries will face higher charges. For example, the US has imposed a 20 percent import duty on products originating in Vietnam, but will charge double that figure for goods routed via the Southeast Asian country.

Transshipment is not a new word or concept. In trade, it simply means moving goods between vehicles such as airplanes, trains and lorries. Trump, however, is using it as a shorthand for tariff evasion or fraud.

He has good reasons to be concerned. Just look at what happened when the president slapped duties on China in 2018. The share of US imports arriving from the People's Republic fell by 8 percentage points to 13.4 percent between 2017 and 2024. However, China's total share of global merchandise exports rose about 1.5 percentage points to 14.2 percent over a similar period. One reason is that some Chinese manufacturers dodged US duties by re-routing everything from electronics to footwear through other countries, in particular Mexico and Vietnam.

Container trucks are seen as they wait to cross the border at Huu Nghi border gate connecting with China, in Lang Son province, Vietnam. The US has imposed a 20 percent import duty on products originating in Vietnam, but will charge double that figure for goods routed via the Southeast Asian country.

PHOTO: REUTERS/FILE

The exact size of the problem is a subject of intense debate and study among economists. Trump's new trade regime makes it even more complicated. The existing global trading system is based on applying a standard tariff on imports, and then granting goods from certain countries, or groups of countries, preferential access.

Under Trump's new system, however, the US will no longer have a standard non-preferential tariff, nor one of the world's lowest tariff regimes. Instead, the charges on goods arriving from different countries could vary by as much as 40 percentage points, depending on where US tariffs end up. Separate levies that Washington intends to apply on semiconductors and pharmaceuticals will add further complexity.

This raises the stakes for customs officials trying to determine where a product is from. So-called "rules of origin" were first introduced to help countries collect statistical data, and have proliferated over the past 30 years to support bilateral and regional free trade agreements. These rules are also supposed to help countries implement other policies, such as anti-dumping measures.

READ MORE ON B2