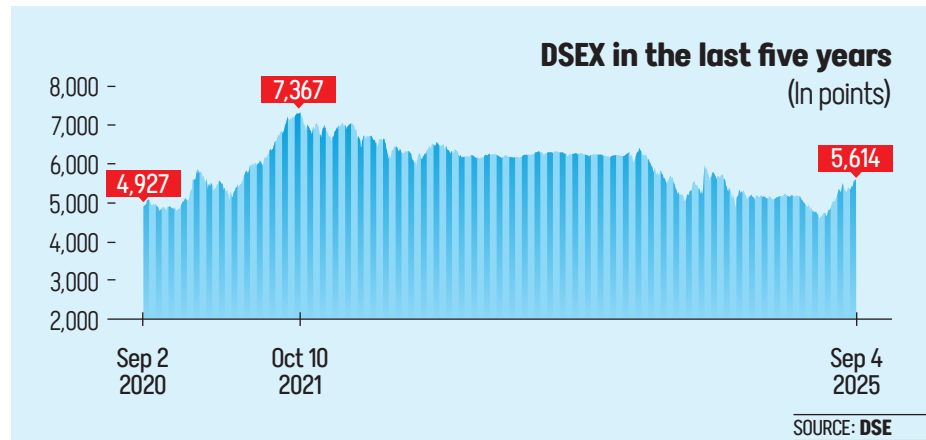




BUSINESS



Govt to revive stock market with multiple schemes



REJAUL KARIM BYRON and AHSAN HABIB

The interim government has taken a series of steps to restore confidence among investors and reinvigorate the stock market, which has been hovering between 4,000 points and 5,500 points for the last several years.

Fresh capital is being channelled into the state-run Investment Corporation of Bangladesh (ICB) to help stabilise the market and protect small investors.

The government has also extended a Tk 900 crore special fund for the market by five years till 2032. It was formed after the 2010 market crash to support retail investors.

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Alongside this, the finance ministry is going to provide Tk 2,000 crore to ICB, which got a sovereign guarantee against Tk 3,000 crore in loans last year.

To increase the supply of quality shares to the market, the government agencies have shortlisted ten firms, including six multinationals, namely Unilever, Nestlé, Novartis, Syngenta, Synovia (formerly Sanofi Bangladesh) and Karnaphuli Fertilizer Company.

Since the government holds roughly 40 percent stakes in most of the multinationals, officials say they are looking to offload at least five percent of their shares to the public.

Four state-run firms -- Pashchimanchal Gas Company, North-West Power Generation, Sylhet Gas Fields and Karnaphuli Gas Distribution -- have been shortlisted, according to a list sent by ICB Capital Management, a state-owned merchant bank, to the finance ministry.

General and institutional investors, who have long been demanding an increase in the supply of good scrips in the stock market, are now feeling optimistic.

Dhaka Stock Exchange (DSE), the main bourse, has 360 listed companies. Three years ago, the number of listed companies was 350.

Over the past 13 years, 127 companies

have been listed on the stock exchanges through the issuance of initial public offerings. And over half of those are categorised as poor performing companies giving no or low dividends, according to the DSE.

DSEX, the benchmark index at the DSE, closed at 5614.27 yesterday, shedding 17.33 points or 0.30 percent from the previous day.

The DSE launched DSEX in 2013. The value of the index was 4,055 points, three years after the bursting of the previous bubble. It never rebounded to the previous highs of 8,900 points, with stakeholders blaming the absence of adequate quality stocks.

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Owners, rights activists debate over proposed trade union threshold

REFAYET ULLAH MIRDHA

Major trade bodies and private employers have voiced concern over proposed changes to labour law that would allow a trade union to form with a minimum of 20 workers, instead of the current requirement of 20 percent of the factory workforce.

In a statement yesterday, the Bangladesh Employers' Federation (BEF) said the move to allow just 20 individuals to form an enterprise-level union, regardless of factory size, "poses serious risks".

Key trade bodies such as the Bangladesh Garment

Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA), Bangladesh Textile Mills Association (BTMA) and Bangladesh Tea Association have expressed support for the employers.

However, the government has described the criticism as a misunderstanding. It argues that numbers are not the main issue, as union leaders would still need to secure 51 percent of votes in a factory election to take charge.

Meanwhile, labour rights activists point to international

other countries.

Amid advocacies by the European Union (EU) and the United States, the government has begun amending the labour law to comply with International Labour Organisation (ILO) standards. Officials expect the process to be completed by October this year.

In late August, the draft amendments were discussed at a meeting of the tripartite consultative council, which was attended by representatives of government, industry and workers. The meeting agreed to ease the process of labour union formation.

Soon after, employers' federation



PHOTO: STAR

The government expects that the amendments to the labour law will be completed by October this year.



practice. They say owners have little to fear if unions are allowed with as few as 20 workers, noting similar models have worked in

raised alarm, saying that the lower bar could eventually deter investment, trigger labour disputes, dent productivity and give rise to multiple paper-based unions in a single factory.

Other trade bodies supporting the employers' federation include the Leathergoods and Footwear Manufacturers and Exporters

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Three banks agree to merge, two oppose

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Among the five Shariah-based banks slated for merger by the central bank, three have agreed to the regulator's plan, while two have opposed it during separate meetings in the last three days.

Those that agreed are First Security Islami Bank PLC (FSIB), Global Islami Bank PLC (GIB), and Union Bank PLC, according to officials familiar with the matter. EXIM Bank and Social Islami Bank PLC (SIBL) resisted the merger.

The central bank has decided to merge the banks under the Bank Resolution Ordinance 2025, citing the fragile financial health of the institutions.

As part of the process, Bangladesh Bank officials held separate consultations with each bank's board and management between September 2 and 4, with Governor Ahsan H Mansur participating virtually, to discuss the path forward before formalising the process.

Banks that agreed to merger are First Security Islami Bank, Global Islami Bank, and Union Bank

Yesterday, the regulator met with officials of GIB and SIBL.

Speaking to The Daily Star after the meeting, Shafiuzzaman, managing director of SIBL, said the lender had asked for two years to stabilise operations and eight years to become a strong institution.

Earlier, the bank's 10 founding shareholders, including current director Major (ret'd) Md Rezaul Haque, had written to the central bank and Ministry of Finance, appealing to avoid being forced into a merger with other troubled lenders.

On Wednesday, the central bank met with Union Bank and EXIM Bank. During its meeting, EXIM Bank presented a turnaround plan but was asked by the regulator to resubmit it with more detail.

Officials of the private commercial bank said it would take at least two years to restore its financial health.

The central bank, in response, instructed the lender

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Govt moves to expedite Tk 38,000cr bad loan cases

REJAUL KARIM BYRON and AHSAN HABIB

The interim government has moved to expedite long-pending lawsuits filed by 10 institutions, including state-owned banks and a non-bank financial institution (NBFI), against loan defaulters, in a bid to speed up the recovery of defaulted loans.

The decision came at a meeting between the Ministry of Finance and senior officials from the plaintiff firms, according to officials familiar with the matter.

As part of the initiative, 100 lawsuits involving Tk 38,000 crore in bad loans have been identified. Many of these cases have been stuck in courts for years, preventing lenders from taking action against defaulters.

"We will write to the Ministry of Law, the Attorney General's office, and deputy commissioners to accelerate the legal process of these cases," Nazma Mubarak, secretary of the Financial Institutions Division (FID) under the Ministry of Finance, said after the meeting.

She added that deputy commissioners would be tasked with handling certificate cases.

The institutions involved include Janata Bank, Sonali Bank, Agrani Bank, Bangladesh Krishi Bank, Rupali Bank, the Investment Corporation of Bangladesh, BASIC Bank, Bangladesh Development Bank, Rajshahi Krishi Unnayan Bank, and the Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission.

The meeting agreed that each institution would submit a list of its ten biggest pending cases to the FID, which will

coordinate efforts to fast-track their resolution.

The firms will also appoint dedicated officials to monitor the lawsuits properly, while a senior executive must hold monthly review meetings and report progress to the FID. The goal is to resolve cases quickly so that lenders can sell off defaulters' assets and recover funds.

The amounts tied up in litigation are staggering. Janata Bank alone has Tk 15,151 crore locked in its ten biggest cases, followed by Sonali Bank with Tk 5,676 crore, Agrani Bank with Tk 3,979 crore, and Rupali Bank with Tk 3,748 crore.

The backlog is part of a larger crisis. The banking sector is struggling with a huge amount of non-performing loans, with the lenders failing to take proper action against many defaulters because of the slow legal system.

Even when the banks step forward to sell assets, defaulters file fresh cases in lower or higher courts to stop the transfer,

forcing banks to wait for years to recover the loans.

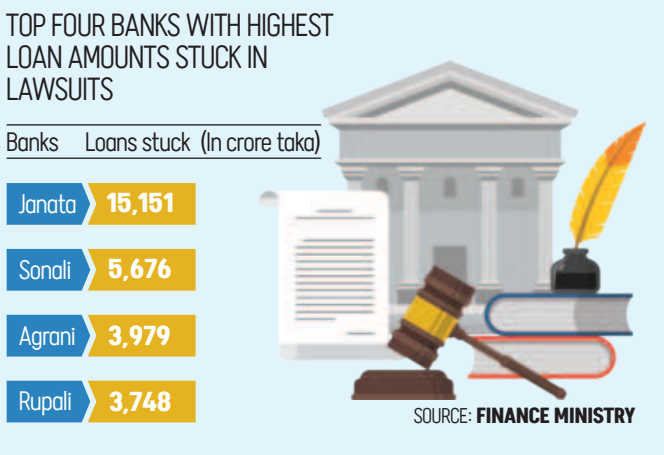
Distressed loans across the banking sector hit a record Tk 756,526 crore in 2024, according to Bangladesh Bank. This included Tk 345,765 crore in defaults, Tk 348,461 crore in rescheduled loans, and Tk 62,300 crore in written-off loans.

A task force on economic reforms reported earlier this year that Tk 178,277 crore was stuck in 72,543 cases as of February 2024.

It said backlogs under the Money Loan Court Act and the Bankruptcy Act remain a major obstacle to loan recovery.

The report also flagged structural flaws in the Money Loan Court Act, 2003, which allows mediation only after litigation begins, making settlements difficult once disputes escalate.

A low judge-to-population ratio and insufficient courtroom facilities have created a bottleneck in resolving NPL-related cases, the report also said.



New telecom licensing policy approved, capping foreign ownership

MAHMUDUL HASAN

The cabinet yesterday approved a new telecom licensing policy aimed at abolishing the fragmented licensing regime while capping foreign ownership in telecom and related services.

The policy simplifies the sector by consolidating more than 20 types of licences into three main categories: national infrastructure, international connectivity, and network access service providers.

Under the previous system, voice and internet services in Bangladesh had to pass through multiple intermediary operators, a structure long criticised by experts for inefficiency and higher costs.

"The new policy reduces the number of intermediaries investing only a few crores in a multi-thousand-crore ecosystem and collecting tolls, while eliminating licences not used elsewhere in the world," said Faiz Ahmad Taiyeb, special assistant to the chief adviser for telecom and ICT.

Under the new framework, operators of International Internet Gateways (IIG), Interconnection Exchanges (ICX), National Internet Exchanges (NIX), and International Gateways (IGW) will be phased out as their existing licences expire.

Bangladesh currently hosts around 20 IGWs, over 30 IIGs, and more than 20 ICXs, with almost all licences due to expire by 2027.

This reform is set to overhaul the telecom ecosystem, as all these operators are local and were licensed under the previous government or during the former caretaker government.

The process of awarding many of these licences has faced widespread criticism, with the BTRC identifying a lack of transparency in fund management in certain cases.

For instance, in 2014, IGW operators formed a cartel under the IGW Operator Switch model, approved by the BTRC without policy amendments, allowing certain operators to dominate the market and secure higher revenues.

Transparency concerns also emerged over Tk 631 crore in so-called Market Development Expenses, with more than 95

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