

23RD BANGLADESH BUSINESS AWARDS

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The Daily Star

AWARDING EXCELLENCE IN BUSINESS

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From left, Mashrur Arefin, managing director and CEO of City Bank; SM Mahbubul Alam, managing director of Walton Hi-Tech Industries; M Anis Ud Dowla, chairman of ACI Group; Salehuddin Ahmed, finance adviser; Sadia Haque, co-founder and CEO of ShareTrip; Ahsan Khan Chowdhury, chairman and CEO of Pran-RFL Group, and Md Miarul Haque, managing director of DHL Express Bangladesh, pose for a photo at the 23rd DHL-The Daily Star Bangladesh Business Awards ceremony at Radisson Blu Dhaka Water Garden on September 23.

PHOTO: STAR

Celebrating Bangladesh's PRIVATE SECTOR CHAMPIONS

MAHMUDUL HASAN

The growth story of Bangladesh is often described through rising graphs and GDP figures. Yet the real narrative lies in the journeys of entrepreneurs, executives and founders who have steered the country from poverty to an economy worth nearly \$460 billion.

That story was retold at the 23rd edition of the Bangladesh Business Awards, jointly hosted by DHL Express and The Daily Star at the Radisson Blu Water Garden Hotel, Dhaka on September 23.

Before an audience of advisers, diplomats, chief executives and civil society leaders, five businesspersons were honoured as examples of how private enterprise has powered the country's transformation.

The night's most resonant moment was the Lifetime Achievement Award for M Anis Ud Dowla, chairman of ACI Ltd, who, over the decades, turned a local arm of a multinational into one of the country's most diversified conglomerates.

"Each of us owes it to ourselves to keep improving," Dowla said in his speech. "Experience should not mean the same year repeated many times. Innovation must be our constant companion."

His caution against complacency set the tone for an evening that repeatedly returned to Bangladesh's readiness for graduation from the least developed country (LDC) status, a shift that will create new opportunities but also remove trade preferences.

The Business Person of the Year award went to Ahsan Khan Chowdhury, chairman and chief executive of Pran-RFL Group. He has led the company's transformation from a small family-run agro venture into a vast consumer goods business with more than 6,000 product lines.

"It was our people and our customers who carried us forward," Chowdhury said.

His firm now reaches distant markets, with products such as Pran Chanachur found on supermarket shelves as far away as Fiji, a sign of how Bangladesh's exports have quietly globalised.

Walton Hi Tech Industries won Best Enterprise of the Year for its role in moving Bangladesh from import dependence to a competitive electronics producer. Founded in the early 2000s, Walton now exports to more than 50 countries.

Its managing director, SM Mahbubul Alam, underlined the message of industrial self-reliance: "Just as others say 'Make in India' or 'America First,' we say, 'Bangladesh on Top.'"

City Bank, once burdened by instability, was named Best Financial Institution of the Year.

Its turnaround since 2007 has produced strong asset growth, an extensive agent banking network and record profits crossing Tk 1,000 crore in 2024.

"This was a long anticipated recognition," said the commercial lender's Chief Executive Officer Mashrur Arefin.

"From being known as a problem bank with central bank observers on its board, we are now one of the country's leading financial institutions. In a time when public trust in banking has been shaken, City Bank stands as proof that reform and integrity at the board level can produce measurable change," he added.

The Outstanding Woman in Business award went to Sadia Haque, who left a lucrative corporate career to co-found ShareTrip, the country's first major travel-tech platform.

"Tourism is rarely seen as central to GDP," said Haque. "I hope this recognition marks a turning point for the industry."

Under her leadership, ShareTrip has



WINNERS OF DHL-THE DAILY STAR BANGLADESH BUSINESS AWARDS-2024

BUSINESS PERSON OF THE YEAR Ahsan Khan Chowdhury, chairman and CEO of PRAN-RFL Group

ENTERPRISE OF THE YEAR Walton Hi Tech Industries

FINANCIAL INSTITUTION OF THE YEAR City Bank

OUTSTANDING WOMAN IN BUSINESS Sadia Haque, co-founder and CEO of ShareTrip

LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD M Anis Ud Dowla, chairman of ACI Group

pioneered digital booking and fintech integration while also breaking barriers in a male-dominated sector.

The awards not only celebrated private sector achievements but also pointed to unfinished business.

Finance adviser Salehuddin Ahmed praised the "remarkable dynamism" of the local private sector but warned that graduation from LDC status will demand sharper competitiveness.

"You have to look at the global situation as well as the local," he said. "We will facilitate all kinds of support through policy reforms and process simplifications, but ultimately, competitiveness lies in your hands,"

through political patronage while others struggle despite operating honestly.

"We must distinguish between honest and dishonest businessmen," he said.

He urged the interim government to seize its limited time. "You may only have six months, but even that is enough to implement critical, low-hanging reforms and leave a roadmap for the next administration."

The event was attended by Sarah Cooke, British high commissioner to Bangladesh; Tapan Chowdhury, managing director of Square Pharmaceuticals; Simeen Rahman, group chief executive of Transcom Group; AK Azad, chairman and chief executive of Ha-Meem Group;

Since 2000, DHL Express and The Daily Star have been recognising firms, financial institutions, business icons, and women entrepreneurs for their achievements and efforts

Ahmed said.

Commerce Adviser Sk Bashir Uddin also talked about getting ready for a more demanding global market.

Md Miarul Haque, managing director of DHL Express Bangladesh, framed the challenge in terms of agility.

He said the private sector must evolve with innovation and collaboration to remain competitive in a fast-changing global economy.

"Tonight's awardees are not only shaping industries but also contributing to the nation's economic advancement," said Haque.

In his speech, The Daily Star Editor and Publisher Mahfuz Anam cautioned against the state's inconsistent treatment of entrepreneurs, where some thrive

Abdul Muktadir, chairman and managing director of Incepta Pharmaceuticals; Zaved Akhtar, president of the Foreign Investors' Chamber of Commerce & Industry; Naser Ezaz Bijoy, chief executive of Standard Chartered Bangladesh; and Syed Mohammad Kamal, country manager of Mastercard.

Shaheen Anam, executive director of Manusher Jonno Foundation; Fahmida Khatun, executive director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue; and Geetara Sufiya Choudhury, a former caretaker government adviser, were also present.

Kazi Wahidul Alam, editor of the tourism and aviation fortnightly Bangladesh Monitor, and Dewan Hanif Mahmud, editor of Bonik Barta, among others, attended the event.

Businesses show dynamism in global expansion Finance Adviser Salehuddin Ahmed says

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Bangladesh's businesses have showcased remarkable dynamism in expanding their reach beyond national borders, said Finance Adviser Salehuddin Ahmed.

"Performance is really good. Our products are going to different countries, and our services are being provided to different countries," he said.

His remarks came at the 23rd DHL-The Daily Star Bangladesh Business

Referring to Bangladesh's LDC graduation, Ahmed urged the private sector to take a leading role in job creation and global expansion

Awards ceremony at Radisson Blu Dhaka Water Garden on September 23, where five businesses and entrepreneurs were honoured for contributions to job creation and economic growth.

Referring to Bangladesh's scheduled graduation from the least developed country (LDC) category in November 2026, Ahmed urged the private sector to take a leading role in job creation and global expansion, warning that government resources alone cannot sustain growth.

He said private companies, rather than the state, will be the main driver of employment.

"The government cannot create employment, except in some areas. Private sector development will really fuel employment," he said.

Public sector jobs accounted for 6 percent of the total employed population in 2024, while the private sector employed 94 percent of the workforce, according to the Labour Force Survey by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS).



**AHSAN KHAN CHOWDHURY**CHAIRMAN AND CEO OF
PRAN-RFL GROUP**BUSINESS PERSON
OF THE YEAR****From
family
business
to global
player****JAGARAN CHAKMA**

Ahsan Khan Chowdhury, chairman and CEO of Pran-RFL Group, has been named the recipient of this year's Business Person of the Year, one of the most prestigious accolades presented at the Bangladesh Business Awards.

The annual event is co-organised by DHL Express Bangladesh and The Daily Star to recognise and honour outstanding contributions to Bangladesh's economic progress.

In an exclusive interview, Chowdhury reflected on the journey of building one of Bangladesh's largest and most diversified business conglomerates.

The small family business has grown

primary strengths—farming and food. I inherited that belief," Chowdhury shared.

Pran's early ventures included processing and canning pineapple and other local produce.

With time, the company expanded into juices, sauces, pickles, and snacks—responding to both domestic and international demand. Gradually, the group extended its footprint into plastic goods, home appliances, bicycles, footwear, and heavy manufacturing.

Under Chowdhury's leadership, Pran-RFL Group grew from a small agro-processing business into one of Bangladesh's largest employers, directly engaging over 167,000 people.

"We want to create 10 lakh jobs. That's



into a multinational group with over 6,000 product lines and \$3 billion in annual turnover, equivalent to Tk 36,000 crore.

"When I joined my father's business in 1992, we were a team of about 30 to 40 people. The company's turnover was only about Tk 1 crore. But I had a dream—to make this company the best in Bangladesh," Chowdhury said.

The late Maj Gen (retd) Amjad Khan Chowdhury, founder of Pran Group, laid the foundation of the business in 1981.

Ahsan joined in 1992, shortening his business studies in the US to return to Bangladesh and fulfil a lifelong dream—to work alongside his father and carry forward his vision.

"My father was passionate about agriculture. He believed in building value-added industries around our country's

our dream," he stated with conviction. He credits rural empowerment as a cornerstone of their strategy.

"We're investing massively in northern and southern Bangladesh, including our upcoming industrial park in Bholia, which I believe will be our biggest project yet," he said.

From food processing to fisheries, Pran-RFL Group's investments are helping to stabilise rural incomes, improve nutrition, and foster economic self-reliance across the country.

"Today, the largest number of jobs we're creating are in rural Bangladesh, not in Dhaka or Chattogram. We are shifting the industrial conversation," he explained.

Pran-RFL Group exports to over 145 countries, with a current annual export

revenue of \$500 million. But this did not come easily.

"We initially struggled against Thai competition. That taught us a lesson—dominate your domestic market first, then go abroad," Chowdhury explained.

Their international strategy is driven by continuous innovation, adapting to diverse consumer trends from Kerala to Kenya, and staying ahead of food safety standards aligned with British Retail Consortium (BRC) certifications.

"Export is not just about volume; it's about trust and quality. We had to learn this, the hard way sometimes," he added.

Diversification was also key. From canned pineapples to injection-moulded plastics and bicycles, the group expanded both vertically and horizontally.

"If one sector slows, others carry the weight. That's how we stay resilient," he said.

Asked about the future, Chowdhury emphasised the importance of adaptability, technology, and grooming young leadership.

"My children are already getting involved. We're building a culture where

hard, be competitive, and build something here. Our country has what it takes."

He urges young Bangladeshis not to give in to negativity or the allure of going abroad permanently. "We need the best minds here. This country needs you."

"Don't be afraid of hard work or risk. Believe in ethical business, believe in long-term vision, and most of all, believe in yourself," he added.

While acknowledging government efforts, Chowdhury believes more can be done to create an enabling environment for large-scale industrialisation.

"If the government listens to economists, business leaders, and think tanks, and provides policy support, we'll go much further, much faster," he said.

He highlighted areas such as export incentives, trade facilitation, infrastructure development, logistics improvement, and land access as critical areas where government support can accelerate private sector growth.

"We have a resilient economy and a capable workforce. What we need now is a smarter, business-friendly policy," he said.

The small family business has grown into a multinational group with over 6,000 product lines and \$3 billion in annual turnover, equivalent to Tk 36,000 crore

the next generation is ready to compete globally with fresh ideas and smart thinking," he said.

Pran-RFL Group uses real-time data, international market research, and predictive analytics to shape product development and consumer engagement.

"If we're selling in New York, we can't think like we're in Narayanganj. We have to benchmark against the best," he said with a smile.

The company also invests heavily in training, design, packaging innovation, and market-specific research and development.

"We are becoming a design-first, consumer-centric brand. That's what the future demands," he added.

To aspiring entrepreneurs, Chowdhury's message is clear:

"Stay positive. Stay in Bangladesh. Work

With current growth trends of 30 to 40 percent annually, Chowdhury sees no reason why Pran-RFL Group cannot become a \$25 billion company within the next 20 years.

"We're not done. We're just getting started."

He cites rising per capita income, the growth of the Bangladeshi middle-income group, and increased global demand for processed food as favourable tailwinds.

"We're investing in future-proofing the company. Our dream is to make Bangladesh proud on the world stage," he concluded.

With deep roots, a bold vision, and an unshakeable belief in Bangladesh, Ahsan Khan Chowdhury continues to inspire a new generation of entrepreneurs—not just to dream big, but to build bigger.

**SM SHAMSUL ALAM**
CHAIRMAN OF WALTON
HI-TECH INDUSTRIES**ENTERPRISE OF
THE YEAR****Walton's
wind of
change****AHSAN HABIB**

Children of the 1990s can relate to the fact that many of them used to rush to their neighbour's house to watch their preferred television programmes, as televisions were not available in most homes.

Refrigerators too were an uncommon appliance in households at that time. This scenario has now completely changed, as most households now have TVs and refrigerators.

This is, without a doubt, a benefit of goods being produced within the country instead of being imported from abroad. Products became affordable through local manufacturing, while rising income levels also enabled people to purchase the goods.

Walton is one of the companies that pioneered manufacturing electronic products and home appliances within the country.

"When we started manufacturing these products in the country, many people didn't even think of purchasing them," said SM Shamsul Alam, chairman of Walton Hi-Tech Industries PLC.

the company became a manufacturer of electronic products and home appliances. Later, it went beyond the local market by exporting goods to various countries and earning foreign currency.

Walton sells products in several countries under its own brand. "This is a big achievement for the country and the company," said Alam.

Walton's story is one of the most striking corporate journeys in Bangladesh's recent history.

From a modest start in electronics and appliances, the company has grown into a household name across the country, commanding a loyal customer base at home while expanding into international markets.

The conglomerate is fulfilling its vision and proving the usefulness of its name, which it says means "wind of alteration," through its successful contribution to making electric and electronic products and home appliances available in almost all households in the country irrespective of income levels.

It was also successful in altering the industry from being import-based to branching out into exports.

Walton is one of the companies that pioneered manufacturing electronic products and home appliances within the country

The company even struggled to hire any local engineer with experience and expertise in designing a refrigerator factory.

Alam and his four brothers were advised by their father to always work for the wellbeing of the country and its people. So, in 2000, they aimed to focus on manufacturing products that were not produced within the country in an almost fully import-driven industry.

"Our father, in one sense, pressured us to go for manufacturing so that the country could benefit and so that a huge number of jobs could be created," said Alam.

Later, Walton hired around 500 engineers and imparted skills through international trainers to make the dream of local manufacturing come true.

The dream came true in 2008 when

On the other hand, Bangladesh's manufacturing sector was dominated by garments for years. The idea that a homegrown electronics brand could rival international giants seemed far-fetched. Yet Walton proved otherwise.

Its gross exports amounted to Tk 45 crore in the first nine months of fiscal year 2024-25 (FY25). It was Tk 27 crore in the same period of the previous year.

Through huge investment, vertical integration, and an unyielding focus on affordability, it has transformed the consumer electronics landscape.

Refrigerators, televisions, and later smartphones bearing the Walton logo entered millions of homes, challenging imports and shifting consumer behaviour.

Recently, it started producing lifts, which were another import-based product in the country.

around 12 percent since the tax cut, thanks to the availability of electricity in both urban and rural areas as well as an increase in the purchasing power of people.

Now, the total market is worth around Tk 5,000 crore, with an average local demand of over 10 lakh units per year.

"The main reasons behind the products becoming affordable for people are that they were being manufactured within the country and labour costs were low," said Alam, adding that labour costs in Bangladesh were low compared to those in other countries.

"On the other hand, if they had imported the final product, it would have required a huge amount in carrying costs," he said. "Now, they are adding value within the country and bringing in only raw materials, so the overall cost of goods

becomes lower than imported ones."

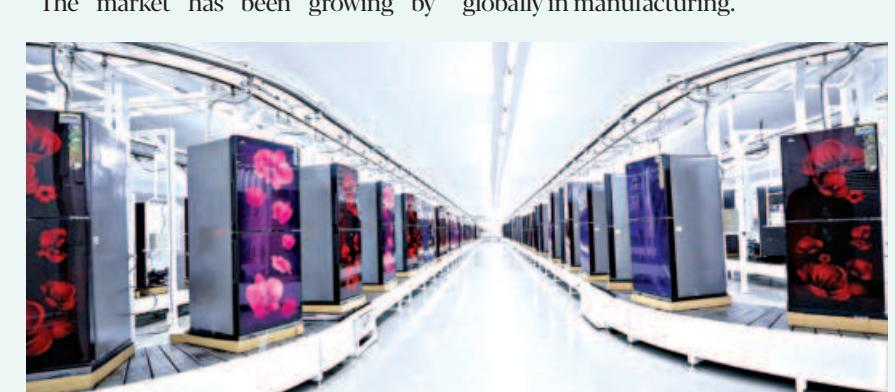
But has Walton really been able to change how people view home appliances?

In essence, there has been a dramatic shift, as home appliances are now viewed by families as a necessity, whereas earlier those were considered luxury products.

"Once it was a fully import-dependent sector in the country, whereas now 90 percent of the demand is met by local companies," said Alam.

Now, Walton itself meets 60 percent to 70 percent of the local demand every year. Moreover, the local giant is now exporting these products to around 50 countries.

Its success inspired confidence that Bangladeshi companies could break free from the identity of predominantly being garment manufacturers and compete globally in manufacturing.



It also created ripple effects—new suppliers, jobs, and skills training followed Walton's rise, contributing to industrial diversification. For the first time, "Made in Bangladesh" electronics became a serious contender.

What cannot be denied is the cultural shift Walton brought about. In villages and cities alike, its products became symbols of aspiration. The affordability of its products ensured the entry of fridges and TVs into almost all houses in the country.

The company proved that local entrepreneurship, when paired with vision and strategy, could scale beyond expectations.

Walton may not have rewritten the patterns of the economy, but it certainly caused a storm of change in the way Bangladeshis perceive their own potential.



MASHRUR AREFIN
MD AND CEO OF CITY BANK

FINANCIAL INSTITUTION OF THE YEAR

How City Bank became a top lender

MD MEHEDI HASAN

While the country's financial sector is passing through a challenging period with more than a dozen banks with weak financials, City Bank has emerged not only as one of the top lenders but also as a pioneer of financial technology.

The private commercial lender has gone through ups and downs in the 42 years since it was founded, but has finally come out on top through its performance, good governance, growth, and innovation.

In its early years, the bank faced major operational and governance challenges to the point of being labelled a "problem bank."

By 2006-2007, non-performing loans were rising, deposit growth had slowed,

operating profit rose from Tk 699 crore to Tk 2,351 crore, 3.36 times higher, while net profit increased from Tk 222 crore to Tk 1,015 crore, nearly five times higher.

When most banks in the country are struggling with high non-performing loans, City Bank has managed to keep its bad loans at a low level.

"We have significantly reduced our NPL ratios through rigorous credit assessment, centralised collections, technology-enabled early-warning systems, and strong provisioning standards," said Arefin.

"It was 5.3 percent when I took over as CEO six years ago, and it is now 3.7 percent at the end of 2024," he said.

City Bank began the journey in 1983, with 12 visionary entrepreneurs taking the step of establishing Bangladesh's

first private commercial bank amid a turbulent time.

On March 27 that year, the bank opened its first branch on Bangabandhu Avenue. "At that time, the founding entrepreneurs didn't have much idea about achieving the right return on equity or return on assets. Their core mission was to do something for the country," said the managing director of City Bank.

"Their maths was far simpler than ours today," he said.

Following the early challenges, the bank's eventual transformation began in 2007 under the leadership of the then chairman, Aziz Al Kaiser Titu, who took a firm resolve to turn the bank around.

A team of six to seven bankers with experience in major international banks was brought in with a reform mandate.

Over the last six years, the bank's

MAHMUDUL HASAN

Leaving behind a flourishing corporate career to dive headfirst into the uncertain waters of entrepreneurship is not a path many dare to tread.

Yet that is precisely what Sadia Haque, the co-founder and CEO of ShareTrip, chose to do.

With over a decade of experience in marketing and leadership roles at companies like Grameenphone, BBC World Service Trust, Nokia, and Banglalink, she had the stability, reputation, and comfort that most professionals aspire to achieve.

But something in her was restless. She wanted to build, not just manage; innovate, not merely execute.

That desire would eventually propel her to become one of Bangladesh's most prominent travel-tech executives.

Her story is not just about setting up a travel booking company. It is about transforming a fragmented, offline-driven industry into a digital ecosystem, fighting through regulatory ambiguity, global crises, and the scepticism that every founder inevitably encounters.

Today, ShareTrip is not only a

They realised the pain points: complex processes of visa applications, hotel confirmations, local tours, and fragmented services.

Friends and family soon began asking them how to organise trips without hassle and with the best deals.

That was when the couple thought: why not build a platform that would do this for everyone?

But building a digital travel company was easier said than done.

"Our main focus was on digitalising the travel industry... but we needed technological support, we needed heavy investment, and at that time, we started only with our own funds," she recalled.

By 2016, they had managed to launch their first app with the hotel booking option only, built with baby steps and a lot of persistence.

In 2018, they met their very first investors—a turning point that provided validation and resources.

Soon after, they rebranded, shutting down the generic-sounding "Travel Booking Bangladesh" and launching ShareTrip, complete with an iOS app, Android app, and website offering an end-to-end travel solution.

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household name for a full-stack travel solution but also a symbol of resilience and digital transformation in Bangladesh's startup landscape.

When asked how the journey began, she smiled and went back to the roots.

"Our journey in the travel industry began in 2014. Back then, we operated under the name Travel Booking Bangladesh, but it was more of an offline mode of operation."

That was the seed—Travel Booking Bangladesh—founded in 2014, at a time when travel planning was still an offline hassle.

For Sadia and her husband Kashef Rahman, who founded the venture, it started from a personal passion.

Both were regular travellers, planning low-budget trips months in advance, often chasing AirAsia's "zero fare" campaigns.

The commercial launch came in July 2019, and with it came both excitement and steep challenges. The traditional travel industry was dominated by offline agents. Convincing customers to trust a local digital platform was not easy, especially one with very pricey tickets.

"We are all comfortable using global platforms like booking.com. But when it comes to a local platform, people hesitate—they wonder, will I really get the service?" Sadia said.

Still, they pressed on, introducing features that made ShareTrip stand out—gamification, loyalty programmes, and bundled services comprising flights, hotels, tours, and attractions.

For a country where tourism was slowly becoming mainstream, this was a game-changer.

And then came Covid-19.

For most travel companies worldwide,

The first CEO was Kazi Mahmood Sattar, followed by Sohail RK Hussain, who now runs Bank Asia. Arefin, the third CEO from that team, took office in 2019.

"My two predecessors did their parts brilliantly," said Arefin. "Looking back, we started by immediately doing a number of things."

Those included centralising credit, trade, and operations by ending branch-based lending; revamping the brand with a new logo and the brand payoff line 'Making Sense of Money'; and restructuring the balance sheet by introducing retail loans.

The CEO said they also relaunched cards with American Express and reimagined the corporate, commercial, and medium-loan segments.

"During my time as the CEO, the loan portfolio became significantly diversified after we started small and microfinance lending as well," added Arefin.

"Now we are into every sector for deposit collection and loan underwriting—from large power sector lending to digital nano loans of just Tk 4,000 on bKash platform," he said.

"We also diversified our portfolio by expanding into SME, retail, and microfinance, while maintaining a strong corporate and trade business," said Arefin.

"Last year, our trade volume was \$7.2 billion, and our nano loans reached 65 lakh people on bKash. This ability to operate at two poles of the socioeconomic strata is something perhaps only City Bank can do," he said.

On governance, the managing director said, "We follow a strong framework. We have independent board committees overseeing risk, audit, and compliance."

"Credit decisions are fully policy-driven, backed by system-based controls and aligned with regulatory best practices. Business units are completely separated from credit decision-making and credit administration," he said.

On digital initiatives, Arefin talked about their Citytouch banking app.

"It offers Tap & Pay, instant virtual cards, bill payments, loans against deposits, and much more. In 2024 alone, it processed 16 million transactions, serving more than 848,000 users," he said.

City Bank is one of two lenders to have entered the Tk 1,000-crore net profit club, achieving a historic milestone

In this process, City Bank also brought in International Finance Corporation as the bank's single largest shareholder, launched Citytouch digital banking, and introduced new services such as Citygem Priority Banking, City Alo for women, City Islamic, and Bancassurance.

The bank's Citytouch app saw transaction volumes of about Tk 1.2 lakh crore last year.

The bank also formed four subsidiaries, including a remittance company in Malaysia that operates 15 branches and sends about \$300 million annually to Bangladesh.

Arefin said several bold reforms have transformed City Bank into one of the top performing banks in Bangladesh.

It strengthened governance by ensuring a clear separation between board and management roles.

"In addition, we have introduced digital DPS, enabling customers to open and manage deposit schemes entirely through Citytouch," he said.

"And with bancassurance, we sold 31,000 insurance policies in just one year from our counters—a 58 percent market share," he said.

The CEO said the bank now wants to balance sustainable growth with resilience.

"We will scale up SME and retail lending with a focus on quality. A key priority is also to expand City Impex, our new online platform for seamless trade services," said Arefin.

Meanwhile, Hossain Khaled, chairman of City Bank, said they also aim to strengthen payments and merchant ecosystems and deliver more services digitally.

"Travel is no longer just our business. We have also gone into the lifestyle segment. When customers started reaching out to us about how they could get benefits from other brands and retail outlets, a new vertical for business expansion came to light for ShareTrip."

But behind the milestones lies a tougher story—the struggle of being a founder in the startup ecosystem. "Our biggest challenge has not just been building technology," she said.

"It has been navigating unclear policies, regulatory delays, and sometimes, the absence of recognition that startups are different from traditional businesses."

The travel industry in particular suffers from fragmented policies involving visa processes, aviation

platform. This not only kept the company afloat but also expanded its portfolio.

"We launched B2B in May 2020, just after the lockdown started in March. We said your shop is closed—but you can still log in from home and serve your customers. That changed everything."

The resilience paid off. ShareTrip attracted further rounds of investment, including support from Startup Bangladesh and eventually securing series funding with global participation. In total, the company raised over \$11.5 million— one of the highest funding figures for a Bangladeshi travel-tech startup.

With that capital, the company has diversified into lifestyle services—ShareTrip's homegrown wallet "STPay." Licensed under the central bank, it offers travel loans, insurance, EMI facilities, and partnerships with retail brands.

regulations, and tourism guidelines—all operating in silos.

For a digital platform that connects all these dots, the lack of an integrated policy framework has often been frustrating.

"Sometimes you feel like you're fighting battles on too many fronts," she admitted. As a female co-founder, she faced additional scepticism. Many doubted whether a woman could scale a tech-driven venture in a male-dominated travel industry.

"But once you start delivering, results speak louder than bias."

Looking ahead, Sadia is cautiously optimistic. The government has spoken about supporting startups and bringing regulatory clarity to industries like travel and fintech. If fully implemented, these could unlock huge opportunities.



SADIA HAQUE
CO-FOUNDER AND CEO OF SHARETRIP

OUTSTANDING WOMAN IN BUSINESS

From passion to travel icon

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The commercial launch came in July 2019, and with it came both excitement and steep challenges. The traditional travel industry was dominated by offline agents. Convincing customers to trust a local digital platform was not easy, especially one with very pricey tickets.

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For a country where tourism was slowly becoming mainstream, this was a game-changer.

And then came Covid-19.

For most travel companies worldwide,

the pandemic was devastating. Flights were cancelled, borders shut, and revenues evaporated. Sadia described it as both a curse and a blessing.

"Of course, Covid devastated the entire world... but for us, it was also a blessing in disguise. Because people suddenly had no option other than digital. What I had been trying to educate customers about since 2019—Covid gave that push for us."

During those months of uncertainty, ShareTrip pivoted quickly. They launched a B2B model, allowing small offline agents to log in and continue selling tickets digitally.

They also developed ST Rooms, a hotel management system that has onboarded over 1,500 hotels to date in Bangladesh, bringing their inventories into one digital

platform. This not only kept the company afloat but also expanded its portfolio.

"We launched B2B in May 2020, just after the lockdown started in March. We said your shop is closed—but you can still log in from home and serve your customers. That changed everything."

The resilience paid off. ShareTrip attracted further rounds of investment, including support from Startup Bangladesh and eventually securing series funding with global participation. In total, the company raised over \$11.5 million—one of the highest funding figures for a Bangladeshi travel-tech startup



MANIS UD DOWLA
CHAIRMAN OF ACI

**LIFETIME
ACHIEVEMENT
AWARD**

'Business people shouldn't get into politics'

JAGARAN CHAKMA

In an era when the lines between business and politics often blur, M Anis Ud Dowla, one of the most respected names in Bangladesh's corporate history, offers a sharp counterpoint. The chairman of Advanced Chemical Industries (ACI) Ltd believes the two should remain firmly apart, and his own career stands as an argument for why.

"Businessmen should not get into politics. Politics is not our cup of tea. We are here to produce wealth for the nation. Let the politicians handle politics," he said in an exclusive interview with The Daily Star, after being honoured recently with the Lifetime Achievement Award

divested its operations in Bangladesh. The company approached him with an unusual proposition: to take over its assets on a "pay-as-you-earn" basis. He accepted, and ACI was born.

"It was a first-class arrangement. From that point onwards, I became an entrepreneur," Dowla said.

Today, ACI employs more than 29,000 people and operates through 29 subsidiaries across pharmaceuticals, consumer brands, agribusiness, and logistics. Crucially, its growth was not tethered to political favour.

Asked about his initial resources, Dowla replied with characteristic humility: "My capital was my mind and

into a few key insights: "There is no shortcut to success. Hard work, passion, and ethical integrity are non-negotiable."

He stressed that success must be built on ethical leadership, customer-centric approaches, and a culture of continuous learning.

"Customers are our kings. Without them, we are orphans. We must focus on solving their problems, not just selling our products."

**DRAWING THE LINE BETWEEN
BUSINESS AND POLITICS**

It is on the question of politics that Dowla is most uncompromising.

"Policies must be pro-people, pro-growth, pro-employment. The broader interest of the nation must come before any personal or political agenda," he said.

But his message to businessmen is sharper still. "Stay away from politics. It is not your domain. Your role is to create jobs, generate wealth, and support the nation's economy."

He warned against the dangerous blend of politics and business, where influence replaces merit and governance becomes compromised.

"Politics is not a livelihood. It is a

Leadership, in his view, is about unlocking the potential of the employees.

"We say this often: anyone who joins ACI is part of a family. We are in this together," stated the ACI chairman.

To aspiring entrepreneurs, his advice is simple: "Love your work. Try and try again. If you love what you do, your leisure becomes your work, and you become highly productive."

He sees failure not as an end but as a lesson.

"Failure often results from distraction or complacency. Re-examine your efforts, learn from your mistakes, and make a new start. Success will come with perseverance," Dowla said.

Looking ahead, Dowla was optimistic about the trajectory of Bangladesh's business landscape but warned that stagnation is not an option.

"Stagnant business is a dead business. To grow, we must keep working hard, innovating, and striving for excellence," he said.

For him, the future depends on partnership, not rivalry, between government and business. "The success



at the 23rd Daily Star-DHL Business Awards.

Dowla began his professional life far from entrepreneurship, serving as a professional business executive in multinational companies in Pakistan, Kenya, and Bangladesh. His expertise in administration and management equipped him for the corporate transformation that would later define his legacy.

"I was always experimenting, improving productivity, reducing costs, and finding new ways to innovate – sometimes with the headquarters' approval, sometimes on my own," he recalled.

The turning point came in 1992, when Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI)

my efforts."

Though ACI raised capital through rights issues and borrowing, what set them apart was not just access to funds but the strategic utilisation of resources and an unwavering focus on values.

"We set our mission to improve the quality of life. Our values were quality, customer focus, innovation, fairness, transparency, and continuous improvement. These aren't just words – we lived them."

Under his leadership, ACI became the first Bangladeshi company to secure ISO 9001 certification, a marker of its commitment to quality management and international standards.

Reflecting on a career spanning over 65 years, Dowla distilled his learnings

service. If you have achieved excellence in your field of specialisation and want to give something back to society, then you may enter politics – not for tenders, not for contracts, but to serve," said Dowla.

He added that government must, in turn, recognise the contribution of the private sector:

"Employment generation, wealth creation – these mostly come from private sector initiatives. The state must recognise and support these efforts."

Dowla states that ACI's greatest strength is its people. "Our employees are our most valuable asset. We treat them as part of the ACI family. We motivate them, respect them, and celebrate their contributions."

of our nation depends on collaboration. Government policies must empower private enterprise, not undermine it."

Despite his age, Dowla continues to lead an active life. Even in his late eighties, he continues to draw energy from work rather than rest.

"I love my work. That's where I find energy. My rest is in thinking about the company and new ideas."

He doesn't spend much time on traditional forms of relaxation, preferring to invest his hours in thinking, planning, and execution.

"Life is limited. We must make the best use of it. If we live productively, we honour the life given to us by Allah," he said. "We are here to serve mankind. That is our duty and purpose."



Agility, ideas vital for growth

Says Md Miarul Haque, MD of DHL Express Bangladesh

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Bangladesh's private sector must respond to change with agility, innovation, and collaboration to remain competitive in a rapidly shifting global economy, said Md Miarul Haque, managing director of DHL Express Bangladesh.

Speaking at the 23rd Bangladesh Business Awards, jointly organised by DHL and The Daily Star on September 23, Haque said businesses must act not only as contributors but also as co-creators of the country's future.

"Tonight, we gather not just to celebrate achievements, but to recognise the journeys that are shaping Bangladesh's future – journeys built on enterprise, foresight, and the courage to adapt," he said.

Haque noted that Bangladesh has achieved steady economic progress through deliberate effort, strategic choices, and the resilience of its private sector. However, he cautioned that global shifts in standards, markets, and technology demand faster adaptation.

"Bangladesh stands at a historic crossroads. Having successfully met all three UN criteria for graduation, the country is scheduled to exit the least developed category in November 2026," he said.

The milestone will boost the nation's global image and investor confidence while also bringing new challenges, he said.

This year's awards adopted the theme "Powering the Private Sector" and were preceded by a series of roundtables jointly hosted by The Daily Star and DHL in recent months.

The discussions, involving business leaders, policymakers, and experts, focused on the implications of the LDC graduation and strategies to enhance

competitiveness.

Quoting from the final roundtable, Haque highlighted one remark of Anisuzzaman Chowdhury, special assistant to the chief adviser: "Whether graduation comes in 2026 or later, the task is the same: to shift from preference-driven growth to productivity-driven competitiveness."

Haque also cited Mahbubur Rahman, CEO of HSBC Bangladesh, who observed: "Have we progressed?

The answer is yes. Do we have room for improvement? The answer is also yes, especially if we compare ourselves against international standards."

Rahman said that he "fully" agrees with the assertion that logistics will continue to remain crucial for making businesses competitive regardless of LDC graduation.

"We have progressed, but we still have room to improve. The future will not be shaped by ambition alone, but by our ability to build systems that scale, partnerships that endure, and solutions that adapt," he said.

Haque concluded by congratulating this year's award winners, acknowledging the strength and diversity of the country's entrepreneurs, and reaffirming DHL's commitment to Bangladesh's next phase of growth.

"Your presence here tonight reflects the determination of our business community. You are the ones driving change, creating value, and building the future," he said.



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No approval needed to extend outsourced services for ADP

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The interim government has withdrawn a requirement for outsourced personnel to renew approvals for working in annual development programmes (ADP).

The Ministry of Finance issued a circular on Tuesday, saying approval renewals from the ministry were not required for outsourced services as the government sought to expedite implementation of such projects.

In order to properly implement existing ADPs, the government took the decision, said the circular.

According to a guideline on availing outsourced services, the tenure of outsourced service would have to be two years, which can be extended only through approvals from the Ministry of Finance.

Economists are urging the government to ensure the timely and efficient execution of development projects as it helps boost the private sector and create jobs.

IPDC ডিপোজিট | ১৬৫১৯

However, implementation of the ADP in the first two months of the current fiscal year reached its lowest in at least 16 years, with about Tk 5,715 crore being spent during the period.

This means just 2.36 percent of the total outlay for FY26 was used during the July–August period, according to data from the Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED).

Although the political situation this year has been much better than in the first two months of the previous fiscal year, implementation was 20 percent behind the same period last year.

Amid this situation, the government eased processes so that ADP implementation could be expedited.

The slowdown comes in spite of the government rolling out a shortened, austerity-focused ADP for the current fiscal year.

Last month, Planning Adviser Wahiduddin Mahmud expressed concern over the implementation rate.

On this ground, the IMED has put forward a reform package to ensure the timely and efficient execution of development projects.

Key proposals include creating a pool of skilled project directors and offering performance-based incentives.

Telcos allowed to use Voice over Wi-Fi to improve call quality

MAHMUDUL HASAN

The telecom regulator in Bangladesh has approved pilot deployment of Voice over Wi-Fi (VoWiFi) services for mobile operators, aiming to improve indoor coverage and ensure uninterrupted connectivity for users.

Grameenphone and Banglalink have received clearance to test the technology under specific conditions, paving the way for possible commercial launch later this year, according to official documents.

VoWiFi allows mobile users to make and receive calls using Wi-Fi instead of relying solely on cellular towers.

Considered a complementary service to Voice over LTE (VoLTE) and introduced in 2020, it routes calls through an operator's core network via a Wi-Fi access point—home broadband, public hotspots, or enterprise networks—rather than a traditional base station.

The service promises uninterrupted voice connectivity in places where mobile networks struggle—such as basements, high-rise flats, crowded neighbourhoods, or zones where tower installation is restricted.

Technically, VoWiFi uses the IP Multimedia Subsystem (IMS), the same backbone as VoLTE, to deliver calls as IP packets.

Calls through VoWiFi remain fully integrated with operator systems, ensuring lawful interception, security, and smooth handover between Wi-Fi and LTE, shows the BTRC document.

Only VoWiFi-enabled VoLTE handsets will support the service.

For users, the benefit is clearer indoor calls.

For operators, it reduces pressure on spectrum, allows towers to serve more users at higher speeds, and lowers handset battery consumption when connecting through Wi-Fi rather than distant towers.

Globally, over 50 countries already use VoWiFi, including India, Pakistan, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.

GRAMEENPHONE'S PILOT PROPOSAL

Grameenphone, the country's largest

READ MORE ON B3

Customers still chasing refunds after e-commerce scams

Tk 58cr stuck in payment gateways as government efforts stall

REFAYET ULLAH MIRDHA and SUKANTA HALDER

Four years after the e-commerce scams came to light, thousands of customers are still chasing refunds, with many saying they have been left high and dry.

momentum.

During the Covid pandemic lockdowns in 2020, online shopping gained huge popularity in Bangladesh, with platforms such as eOrange, Evaly, Qoom and Alesha Mart collecting huge sums in advance from customers,

Media reports suggested Evaly alone owed customers hundreds of crores. Dozens of angry customers filed cases against company owners, some of whom were arrested while others went into hiding.

Despite the scale of the scandal, the authorities have never provided a

TAKEAWAYS

- Refunds remain stuck in payment gateways
- Tk 58cr is still pending for affected customers
- Tk 476cr has been disbursed already
- Govt formed a cell to oversee e-commerce registration, operations
- The cell has shut down 300+ e-commerce firms over malpractice
- Many e-commerce owners remain absconding and continue delaying refunds

According to officials, Tk 58 crore remains stuck in the central bank's payment gateway, as repayment efforts by the authorities lose

promising to deliver goods at bargain prices. Instead, they reportedly siphoned off thousands of crores of takas.

After the government introduced the Digital Commerce Policy in 2021, those controversial business models began to unravel. Payments made by customers became stuck in gateways, and many never saw their goods or their money again.

A disgruntled e-commerce customer, who asked not to be named, said he ordered Tk 3.5 lakh worth of goods from Qoom in June 2021. The goods never arrived, and he is still waiting for his refund.

definitive estimate of how much was misappropriated.

Amid public outcry, the government later set up the Central Digital Commerce Cell (CDCC) to oversee refunds.

Md Sayed Ali, deputy secretary of the cell, said they detected Tk 534 crore in the central bank's escrow system. Of that amount, Tk 476.02 crore has so far been refunded to 95,923 customers.

"Refund from the escrow service has been delayed because in many cases the investigation is needed by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) to find the authentic information and to find the original affected customers," he said.

READ MORE ON B3

Construction slump pushes steel industry into deep crisis

Manufacturers say many factories closed while others sell at a loss just to meet loan instalments

Market situation

Steel sector faces steepest downturn in decades	Prices plunge to Tk 78,000-Tk 82,000 per tonne	Demand slumps over 60% amid stalled public projects	Real estate slowdown further dents consumption	Mills forced to sell below cost to avoid bank defaults
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Production

Production costs stand at Tk 84,000-Tk 86,000 per tonne	High bank interest rates deepen industry losses	Advance income tax on scrap imports adds to burdens
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Only 14-15 out of 40 mills remain operational

They are running at reduced capacity

Financial strains

High bank interest rates deepen industry losses	Advance income tax on scrap imports adds to burdens
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JAGRAN CHAKMA

Bangladesh's mild steel (MS) rod industry is experiencing its worst downturn in decades, hit by a collapse in public and private construction activity, weak demand, high interest rates, and rising operational costs.

Prices have been persistently falling over the last year, with manufacturers saying they are being forced to sell at a loss just to survive and to meet loan instalments.

According to the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB), 60-grade MS rod was retailing at Tk 83,500-Tk 86,000 per tonne at the end of September, down from Tk 85,000-Tk 89,000 in early August, and a peak of nearly Tk 1 lakh in mid-2024.

Mills are wholesaling at Tk 78,000-Tk 82,000, while domestic consumption has sharply declined by around 60 percent.

"ONE OF THE WORST-EVER CRISES"

Once driven by mega infrastructure projects and a booming real estate

market, the MS rod industry was on its way to becoming an economic powerhouse. These days, manufacturers say they are having to sell below production cost just to meet bank obligations and avoid default.

"Bangladesh's steel industry is facing one of its worst ever crises," said Md Shahidullah, managing director of Metrocrom Steel, told The Daily Star yesterday.

He noted that product prices have been dropping despite raw material costs in the international market remaining unchanged. "We are importing at the same cost as before, but now we're forced to sell at a loss. The math just doesn't work."

Industry insiders say the main reason remains a steep fall in infrastructure projects.

Government data shows public development spending has reached its lowest execution in at least 16 years, with just Tk 5,715 crore spent in July-August, equivalent to 2.36 percent of the allocation for the fiscal year. Prior to this,

the last fiscal year 2024-25 marked the weakest performance in 49 years.

The slump came as the interim government put a halt to many mega projects taken under the previous administration, and average project approval has also declined.

Shahidullah estimates current rod production costs at Tk 88,000-Tk 90,000 per tonne, leaving mills to absorb Tk 4,000-Tk 8,000 losses per tonne to maintain cash flow and meet loan obligations.

"If we don't sell, we default. That would trigger blacklisting by the Credit Information Bureau and loan classification," he stated, adding that the industry's biggest challenge is financial cost. "Bank interest rates are sky-high."

40% FALL IN PRODUCTION

Shahidullah claimed that of a total of 40 steel factories, some have shut down, while only 14-15 mills are running at limited capacity. Production has dropped by around 40 percent. "There's no new investment, no expansion, only survival now."

READ MORE ON B3

Ctg port's higher tariffs to take effect on Oct 15

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Chattogram

The Chattogram Port Authority (CPA) will enforce its revised tariff schedule from October 15, a month later than originally announced.

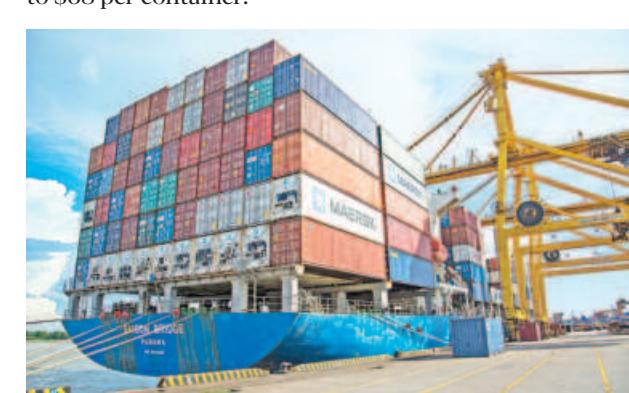
In the first comprehensive revision in nearly 40 years, the CPA in early September raised service charges by an average of 41 percent through a gazette notification.

CPA Secretary Omar Faruk said the authority is bound to implement the tariff as per the gazette.

"However, to ensure smooth application, the board decided to set October 15 as the effective date. All necessary preparations have been completed," he said.

At the port, a series of activities takes place from piloting a ship from the outer anchorage to the jetty, to tugboat services, water supply, crane charges, berthing, loading and unloading containers and delivering goods. CPA charges a fee for each of these services, which together make up the port's tariff.

Under the new tariff rates, importers will pay an additional Tk 5,720 per twenty-foot container, while exporters face an increase of Tk 3,045. The single largest jump is in loading and unloading charges, up from \$43.40 to \$68 per container.



The move drew severe criticism from importers and exporters, who said higher charges will push up the cost of foreign trade and erode the country's competitiveness as it prepares to graduate from least developed country status next year.

CPA officials maintain that even after the adjustment, Chattogram's charges remain lower than those of many regional ports and were long overdue for revision.

The authority, however, later deferred enforcing the tariff by a month to allow businesses time to adjust to the changes. From October 15, all vessel, cargo and container bills for ships arriving after midnight on October 14 will be charged under the new structure.

The move comes as private inland container depots (ICDs) have also hiked charges by as much as 60 percent this month for handling export cargoes and empty containers, adding to trade costs.

The last large-scale revision of charges was in 1986. In 2007-08, fees were increased only for five services, including tugboats, water supply, wharf rent, container storage, and container stuffing and unstuffing.

China launches visa to attract foreign tech talent

AFP, Beijing, China

China kicked off Wednesday a new visa programme aimed at attracting foreign talent in science and technology, part of ongoing efforts to position itself as a world leader in those sectors ahead of the United States.

The Chinese measure, announced in August, stands in stark contrast to recent US policy, with the Trump administration suddenly introducing new and expensive changes to its own skilled worker visas last month.

China's new K visa significantly simplifies the immigration process for those eligible, according to state media.

"Against the backdrop of some countries retreating, turning inward, and sidelining international talent, China has keenly seized this important opportunity and promptly introduced this policy," state newspaper People's Daily said in a comment piece on Tuesday.

In contrast to many other visa categories, the K visa does not require a domestic employer or entity to issue an invitation to the applicant.

"K visas will offer more convenience to holders in terms of number of permitted entries, validity period and duration of stay," state news agency Xinhua reported in August.

The official description for those able to apply is "young foreign scientific and technological talents", but the exact age, educational background and work experience requirements needed are as yet unclear.

Xinhua said visa-holders will be able to "engage in exchanges in fields such as education, culture, and science and technology, as well as relevant entrepreneurial and business activities".

Across the Atlantic, the US tech industry has been rattled by unexpected changes made by the Trump administration to the H-1B visa procedure.

AI investment bubble inflated by trio of dilemmas

REUTERS, London

Tech firms plan to pour trillions of dollars into developing artificial intelligence. Every incremental dollar of new investment carries an even higher value in the stock market. This investment spurge is unlikely to earn a positive return on capital. However, that is beside the point. Companies and investors are trapped inside the bubble, and for many of them there is no escape.

The cloud computing giants' multibillion-dollar data centres come with grandiose names: OpenAI is constructing Stargate, Meta Platforms has Prometheus, while Elon Musk's xAI is building a supercomputer called Colossus. Icarus would appear more fitting. Big Tech's business model used to be capital-light and cash flow-heavy.

No longer. Aggregate capital spending at Amazon, Alphabet, Meta and Microsoft has risen from below \$100 billion five years ago to nearly \$300 billion this year. Around two-thirds of US venture capital deals involve AI or machine learning.

The surge in AI investment added a percentage point to US GDP growth in the first quarter, according to Apollo Global Management. The tech firms are just getting started. Consultancy Bain & Company's latest Global Technology Report estimates that some \$500 billion a year will be spent in the United States over the rest of the decade.

That is a relatively sober forecast. Morgan Stanley sees cumulative investment in US data centres reaching \$3 trillion by 2029. McKinsey & Co anticipates the bill will exceed \$5 trillion by 2030.

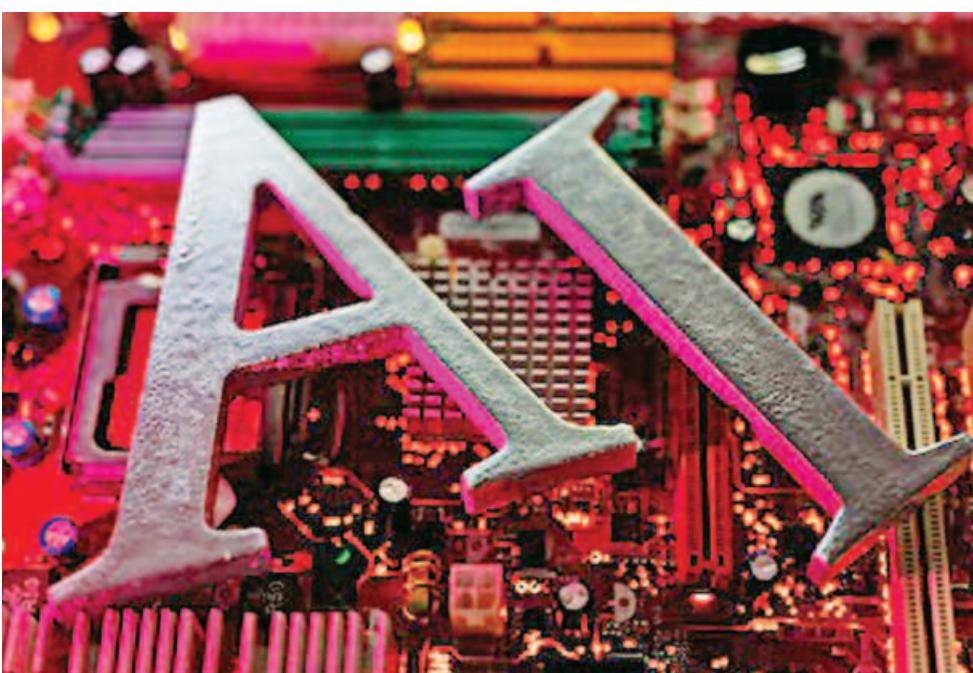
Estimates of the level of AI-related revenue needed to justify this investment spurge are equally wide. A rapid payback is necessary because the expensive graphics processors housed in the data centres have a short lifespan. Bain reckons some \$2 trillion in additional AI revenue is required by 2030.

Morgan Stanley sees cumulative investment in US data centres reaching \$3 trillion by 2029. McKinsey & Co anticipates the bill will exceed \$5 trillion by 2030

Working off Morgan Stanley's \$3 trillion estimate, Charles Carter of Marathon Asset Management calculates that those investments must generate a similar level of annual AI sales if they are to earn their cost of capital. Yet \$3 trillion is equivalent to a tenth of current US GDP and 70 times Citi's estimate of the revenue that AI will generate this year.

Tech leaders claim that AI is going to usher in a new golden age, boosting productivity and profits. However, there is little evidence so far to justify the hype. A recent report from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology found that 95 percent of businesses that had integrated AI into their operations had yet to see any return on their investment.

Of the nine sectors examined in the study,



The surge in AI investment added a percentage point to US GDP growth in the first quarter, according to Apollo Global Management.

PHOTO: REUTERS

only media and technology had experienced major structural changes. It is not for want of effort, as the report states: "adoption is high, but disruption is low."

The trouble, according to MIT, is that generative AI systems do not retain feedback, adapt to context or improve over time. For mission-critical work, the vast majority of companies still prefer to use humans. Instead, employees are using personal chatbot accounts for relatively mundane tasks, such as reading emails.

Though loss-making, OpenAI's revenue has grown rapidly, it does not justify the investment spend. Fewer than 2 percent of the 800 million or so people using ChatGPT pay for the service, and a growing number of them live in low-income countries such as India.

So why do companies continue to sink trillions of dollars into highly speculative and possibly unprofitable investments? Carter suggests that AI creates a so-called "innovator's dilemma" for Big Tech. There's a danger that the new technology will, at some stage, drain the competitive moats that surround their hitherto extremely profitable business models.

Cloud computing firms also face a classic prisoner's dilemma: if one operator fails to invest, it risks losing business to competitors which forge ahead. European mobile phone companies faced the same quandary during the telecom boom of the late 1990s and ended up massively overpaying for 3G spectrum auctioned by the United Kingdom and other countries.

Several top tech executives have publicly acknowledged the dilemma. Last year, Alphabet CEO Sundar Pichai stated that "the risk of underinvesting is dramatically greater than the risk of overinvesting for us." In a recent interview, Meta founder

Mark Zuckerberg said much the same: "If we end up misspending a couple of hundred billion dollars, I think that is going to be very unfortunate obviously ... I actually think the greater risk is on the other side."

Investors also face a dilemma. They have good reasons to adopt a conservative stance. Valuations for AI-related businesses are elevated. Around 35 percent of the market capitalisation of the S&P 500 Index trades at more than 10 times sales, according to investment firm GQG. Big Tech is diverting its cash flow into speculative investments. The previously lucrative cartel of cloud providers is being disrupted by new entrants such as CoreWeave.

The current surge in profit generated by AI investment is unlikely to last. Strategist Gerard Minack writes, "as in the TMT cycle ... a positive feedback loop (exists) between rising investment spending and rising profits: the firm selling capital goods immediately reports its profits in full, while the firm buying the capital good depreciates its cost over time." After the TMT boom ended, the returns for internet hardware companies, such as Cisco, collapsed.

On the other hand, AI is generating extraordinary stock market returns. Nvidia's stock is up nearly 350 times over the past decade. Oracle's recent announcement that cloud infrastructure revenue would reach \$144 billion by 2030 sent its shares up 36 percent in a single day, adding around \$250 billion to the software firm's market value. The US market is more concentrated than ever in a handful of AI-related names. Minack's list of the leading AI plays (Alphabet, Amazon, Broadcom, Meta, Microsoft, Nvidia, Oracle, and Palantir) has climbed nearly 30 percent since the start of the year, while the rest of the S&P 500 has delivered just 8 percent.

Hit by Trump tariffs

FROM PAGE B4
Investment to take advantage of those benefits could kick in sooner though.

Longer term, it is unclear. New trade deals will eke out decimal points of economic growth, while EU exports to the United States and China, where demand for EU goods has slumped, make up roughly 4 percent of EU GDP. Nevertheless, not all of that will be lost.

Niclas Poitiers, research fellow at the Bruegel think tank, says average estimates for the Trump tariff impact on EU exports imply a 0.2-0.3 percent decline of GDP for the bloc, though the impact of uncertainty on corporate investment may be less benign.

Poitiers said trade

agreements have political value too by offering stable relations at a time when the United States is undermining the global economic order and pushing through deals that are not compliant with World Trade Organization rules.

"It's about making sure that your trading relationships are not just reliant on international rules, which are much less firm these days, but are also bound by a bilateral treaty," he said.

What may emerge is a network of deals underpinning the multilateral system, but excluding the United States and to some extent China.

Sabine Weyand, director general of the EU executive's trade division, told a European Parliament

hearing last week that the EU was presenting itself as "the reliable trading partner for the rest of the world".

Sander Tordoir, chief economist at the Centre for European Reform, said Europe could lead a 'rest of the band' group, but noted that it and others such as Japan ran trade surpluses and so needed buyers, not more sellers.

"The challenge is enormous," he said. "The US has long constituted about 50 percent of global trade deficits, acting as a key source of incremental demand for global exports."

So, the band would have to find ways to create demand for each other's exports while pushing back against Chinese overcapacity.

India central bank

FROM PAGE B4
"Despite status quo, the commentary is dovish," said Teresa John, lead economist at Mumbai-based brokerage Nirmal Bang.

"CPI inflation has been revised down to 2.5 percent while growth is expected to moderate in the second half of FY26, both of which open up policy space for rate cuts largely on external headwinds," said John, who expects a 25 bp rate cut in December.

The central bank raised its GDP forecast for the current year to 6.8 percent compared with its previous estimate of 6.5 percent.

The Indian economy grew at a stronger-than-expected 7.8 percent in the April-June quarter from a year earlier.

Economic activity

has remained resilient, Malhotra said. "However, ongoing tariff and trade policy uncertainties will impact external demand," he said, adding that several "growth-inducing structural reforms", including consumer tax cuts could counter the impact of global risks.

The RBI expects inflation in the current financial year to come in at 2.6 percent, lower than its previous estimate of 3.1 percent.

The MPC said the

outlook on inflation has turned more benign due to lower food prices and tax rate cuts, Malhotra said in his statement.

India's annual inflation accelerated to 2.07 percent in August as food prices inched higher, but remained close to the lower end of the central bank's 2 percent -6 percent tolerance band, giving the RBI room to cut rates.

Sakshi Gupta, principal economist at HDFC Bank, cautioned that a December rate cut is not guaranteed and dependent on how growth momentum evolves in the coming months.

The central bank also announced a raft of measures to enhance international acceptance of the rupee and ease lending rules for banks.

Banks will gain greater flexibility to lend to large corporates, reversing restrictions introduced in 2016. They will also be permitted to lend for acquisitions and increase lending against listed securities.

Japan says 'no discrepancies' with US on investments

AFP, Tokyo, Japan

Japan's tariff envoy said Wednesday there were "no discrepancies" with the United States on the \$550 billion of mooted investments by Tokyo as part of their recent trade agreement.

Under the terms of the US-Japan deal lowering threatened tariffs, Tokyo will invest the money in the United States, according to the White House.

South Korea is also on the hook for \$350 billion of investments under a last-minute agreement struck in July reducing looming levies.

US President Donald Trump has said both countries will provide this "signing bonus" upfront.

A US-Japan memorandum of understanding made no mention of immediate payments, saying that would be made "from time to time".

The MoU also stipulated that Tokyo would provide the necessary funding within 45 days of Washington selecting an investment area, or face higher tariffs.

But Ryosei Akazawa, who negotiated the deal for Japan, has said that only 12 percent of the \$550 billion will be actual investment, with the rest loans and loan guarantees.

Washington "isn't particularly interested in the distinction between investments, loans, and loan guarantees" he said Wednesday.

"I do not believe there are any discrepancies. In order to avoid discrepancies, the US proposed the memorandum of understanding and Japan responded to that. And it was signed," he told reporters.

"A memorandum of understanding is not a treaty, nor is it legally binding. A MoU is an administrative document that lays out the common understanding, which I believe we have on both ends," he added.

88% officials pass Islami Bank assessment test

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Islami Bank Bangladesh PLC has published the results of its special competency assessment test for officials, according to a press release.



Eighty-eight percent of candidates passed the examination, which was conducted by the Institute of Business Administration (IBA) at the University of Dhaka.

As per the bank's decision, the remaining 12 percent of unsuccessful candidates will be re-evaluated after completing capacity-building training.

Stakeholders call for next-generation technology to transform remittance services



Ali Ahmed, chief commercial officer of bKash Limited, poses for group photographs with participants of the workshop, titled "The Changing Landscape and Emerging Potential of Remittance in Bangladesh", organised by bKash in Dhaka recently.

PHOTO: BKASH

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Expatriates continue to prioritise low-cost, secure and instant remittance transfers to their families in Bangladesh. To meet this demand, industry players must embrace next-generation technologies and adopt a coordinated approach across the entire remittance ecosystem, stakeholders said at a recent workshop.

The event, titled "The Changing Landscape and Emerging Potential of Remittance in Bangladesh", was organised by bKash Limited, the country's largest mobile financial service provider, according to a press release.

Speakers observed that greater satisfaction among senders would boost remittance flows through formal channels, and thus urged swift policy interventions to keep pace with global practices.

The workshop brought together senior officials from the banks and non-bank financial institutions, mobile financial service (MFS)

providers, along representatives of leading international money transfer operators (MTOs).

In his keynote presentation, Zahidul Ahasan, head of remittance at bKash, highlighted the growth, potential and challenges of the sector.

Ali Ahmed, chief commercial officer at bKash, underscored the importance of collaboration among all institutions within the remittance ecosystem.

"This is the right time for investing in technology-based infrastructure that will transform the remittance sending experience," he said.

International MTO representatives noted that the sector is becoming increasingly competitive, driven by app-based services, where customer experience is emerging as the defining factor.

They stressed that expanding instant services requires data-driven decision-making.

Given that expatriates remit funds largely for essential needs such as housing, investment

and children's futures, stakeholders also emphasised the need for secure savings schemes and access to credit.

Bank representatives recalled that remittance once meant "cash over the counter" with long processing delays. Today, thanks to various initiatives, money can be sent instantly to mobile financial service platforms such as bKash. However, they agreed that more needs to be done to widen access and ensure seamless, fast and secure transactions.

Currently, over 15 million expatriates remit their income to Bangladesh annually from 176 countries. While expatriate numbers are highest in Cumilla, Chattogram, Brahmanbaria, Feni and Noakhali, contributions now come from nearly every district.

The growing adoption of digital platforms by local banks, MFS providers and MTOs has already made the remittance process faster, simpler and more reliable.

Economic activity

has

remained

resilient,

Malhotra

said.

"However,

ongoing

tariff

and

trade

policy

uncertainties

will

impact

external

demand,"

he

said,

adding

that



Local farmers harvest hog plums from their orchards and bring them by boat for sale in bulk to traders. Depending on the size and quality, the fruits are being sold at wholesale prices ranging from Tk 1,300 to Tk 1,600 per maund (around 37 kilograms). The photo was taken in Adamkathi area of Pirojpur district recently.

PHOTO: TITU DAS

Overdue farm loans rise sharply despite higher recovery

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Overdue loans given by banks to the farm sector rose further in July, signalling growing repayment stress and rising credit risk in the agricultural sector, according to a Bangladesh Bank (BB) report released this week.

Unpaid loans almost doubled to Tk 23,800 crore at the end of July 2025 from Tk 12,131 crore a year ago, said the central bank in its July report on agriculture and rural finance.

The increase in overdue loans was primarily attributed to a rise in unpaid loans of state-owned commercial and specialised banks as well as private banks.

July was the second month in which overdue loans taken by farmers operating in various subsectors, including crops, poultry, fisheries, and livestock, increased.

In June, unpaid loans jumped to Tk

21,629 crore from nearly Tk 10,000 crore the previous month.

The BB report said the loan classification criteria, which came into effect in April this year, were a major reason for the significant rise in overdue payments.

"The rise in overdue loans signals growing concerns over credit recovery and the requirement for stronger oversight and risk management to address the credit recovery challenges in the sector," it said.

"This underscores the need for strengthened monitoring and prudent credit management," it said.

"The long-term sustainability of the agricultural sector will depend on strengthening repayment practices while ensuring that farmers continue to have reliable access to credit," it said.

The BB earlier set a target for banks to disburse Tk 39,000 crore during the

current fiscal year (FY) of 2025-26, which was 4.48 percent higher than the actual lending of Tk 37,326 crore in the previous fiscal year.

The long-term sustainability of the agricultural sector will depend on strengthening repayment practices while ensuring that farmers continue to have reliable access to credit

In July of FY26, banks disbursed Tk 2,154 crore, up 20 percent from Tk 1,790 crore a year ago. The amount was, however, lower than the disbursement in June.

The report said the share of agricultural credit disbursement for crops and fisheries decreased slightly in July, while

the share of loans to livestock, poultry, and poverty alleviation increased.

"These indicate a notable shift in sectoral priorities and a strategic move towards promoting livestock-based activities and strengthening rural livelihoods, signalling diversification beyond traditional crop production," said the report.

In terms of recovery, the BB report said banks recovered Tk 2,953 crore in July, which was 15 percent higher year-on-year, thanks to a sharp rise in the recovery of loans by state banks.

However, the recovery fell compared to that in June.

The report said at the end of July, outstanding loans given by the scheduled banks increased by 4.5 percent year-on-year to Tk 59,470 crore.

This increase was mainly driven by the rise in the outstanding balance of foreign banks and state-owned banks.

Factories struggle amid soft demand in China, US

REUTERS, London/Tokyo

Factory activity shrank in much of the world last month, private surveys showed on Wednesday, as signs of a slowdown in US growth and the anticipated impact of President Donald Trump's tariffs added to pressure from weak Chinese demand.

Euro zone manufacturing slipped back into contraction as new orders fell at their fastest rate in six months, with export markets acting as a particular drag, signalling that the recovery in the region's industrial sector was fragile.

The HCOB Eurozone Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI), compiled by

S&P Global, fell to 49.8 in September from August's 50.7, which was the first reading above the 50.0-point line denoting growth since mid-2022.

"The drop in the PMI is showing up across the board, with respective figures for consumer goods, capital goods and intermediate goods all down on the month," said Cyrus de la Rubia, chief economist at Hamburg Commercial Bank.

Surveys revealed a split across the currency union with the Netherlands leading the expansion with activity at a 38-month high while growth continued in Greece, Ireland and Spain. Meanwhile, the bloc's three largest economies -

Germany, France, opens new tab and Italy, opens new tab - all registered contractions.

In Britain, outside the European Union, activity shrank at the fastest pace in five months, reflecting subdued domestic demand and fewer export orders, painting a more downbeat picture than recent official data.

In Asia, the stress on manufacturers highlights the challenge policymakers face in protecting their export-reliant region from higher US levies, a key policy of the Trump administration that has upended the global trade order and put the brakes on economic growth.

Banglalink said they "obtained approval from BTRC for a pilot phase, after which we will go commercial. We are already working with a few ISPs and some corporate customers on this".

CONDITIONS AND OVERSIGHT
BTRC has set strict conditions.

Both operators must limit pilots to business-to-business (B2B) and limited business-to-consumer (B2C) models.

All call records must be logged and shared with regulators, including device location, IP, and MAC addresses. VPN users will face whitelist restrictions.

Trials may take place in Dhaka and at least one location outside the capital to test performance. A BTRC committee will oversee the pilots and prepare a report to guide future decisions.

Other operators are expected to submit proposals soon under the same framework, the BTRC document states.

Commerce Secretary Mahbubur Rahman said recovery was proving

Construction slump

FROM PAGE B1

Pre- and post-election uncertainty, coupled with investor hesitation due to unclear government policies, has further aggravated the situation, he pointed out.

Contractors tied to stalled government and mega infrastructure projects have left large amounts of accounts receivable blocked, worsening cash flow. "We already sold them steel on credit. That's a huge amount of capital now stuck."

"Unless there's immediate policy support or a market recovery," Shahidullah warned, "more factories will shut down."

Additionally, steel producers often sell on credit to distributors in rural or semi-urban areas. But with demand so low, cash flow is drying up.

"It's not just about falling prices," said Salehin Musfiqur Sadaf, director of Strategy & Transformation at GPH Ispat Ltd. "We're incurring substantial losses just to stay operational."

Even if raw materials cost the same as before, local operational spending has become burdensome. "Gas prices have increased twice, electricity costs are rising, and we've had to raise

salaries to retain skilled workers."

He said his company's production costs now range between Tk 86,000 and Tk 90,000 per tonne, but mills are selling at around Tk 82,000, resulting in Tk 4,000-Tk 8,000 losses per tonne, not including interest rates of 13-14 percent.

"We're essentially operating just to service bank loans. It's unsustainable," Sadaf said.

A 5 percent Advance Income Tax (AIT) on scrap imports adds further strain, with limited scope for refunds, he added.

But the core of the problem remains low public project spending, compounded by political uncertainty.

According to Sadaf, demand for MS rod has dropped by 40-45 percent, mainly due to stalled public projects, the real estate slowdown, and political uncertainty. "The industry hasn't recovered since Covid-19. We urgently need policy support to survive."

Anup Kumar Sarker, senior executive director (marketing) at Concord Group, one of the most prominent real estate firms in the country, said real estate is suffering in the current circumstances.

He said the entire real estate industry is under strain, with a clear link between declining sales and stalled projects, and this in turn is affecting related sectors.

"Without adequate funding or financial clarity, executing a project becomes difficult. That directly affects sales, which in turn delays progress," he noted. "When housing slows down, related sectors like steel also suffer due to reduced demand."

Sarker also said, "Even reputed companies face pressure, though smaller developers are hit harder due to reliance on bank loans."

Sumon Chowdhury, secretary general of the Bangladesh Steel Mill Association, said the market has shown a slight price recovery recently, but mills remain in the red.

Raw material imports cost Tk 50,000-Tk 54,000, with around Tk 30,000 in processing and energy costs, he estimated.

Most mills are selling below breakeven due to high bank interest and input costs, he said.

Chowdhury is, however, hopeful that with the right sentiment, things can turn around soon. "Positive sentiment can help demand recover."

Telcos allowed

FROM PAGE B1

operator, first applied for VoWiFi approval in 2022. After several compliance checks with the National Telecommunication Monitoring Centre (NTMC), it submitted a pilot proposal on June 30, 2025.

The plan includes pilots with corporate clients such as PRAN-RFL in Dhaka and Gazipur, Anowara Group in Narayanganj, and residential areas like Bashundhara and Mirpur DOHS. GP employees, family members, regulators, and BTRC will also participate.

The pilot will cover device readiness, live demonstrations, a four-week test period, and evaluation. GP has committed to sharing call data records with the authority, ensuring interception compliance, and submitting bi-weekly updates.

VoWiFi will support voice, video, SMS, and handover between WiFi and LTE, but international roaming will remain restricted, and airplane mode calls will be prohibited.

In a statement, Grameenphone said that "to ensure seamless customer experience, we have already deployed handover capability between VoLTE and VoWiFi technology which will ensure call continuity between public WiFi and GP VoLTE network".

BANGLINK'S READINESS FOR COMMERCIAL LAUNCH

Banglalink applied for approval in May 2023 and completed its proof of concept later that year.

On August 20, 2025, it demonstrated the service at its Dhaka headquarters in collaboration with a broadband operator, showcasing security compliance and end-to-end control.

After completing test scenarios, Banglalink declared itself "fully ready for commercial launch".

It proposed a two-phase rollout—a pilot from August to October 2025 across 500 business and consumer locations, followed by full-scale launch on November 1, 2025.

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difficult because many company owners were either in jail or absconding.

"Particularly, Evaly is not giving the money and also eOrange is playing the irresponsible role in giving back the money to the customers," he said. "However, the money would be realised in phases and customers will be refunded."

Ripon Mia, owner of Qoom, said they have refunded around Tk 400 crore to customers so far.

He claimed that their outstanding amount owed to customers is nearly Tk 10 crore now. "We want the issue resolved as quickly as possible. We hope that all outstanding payments to customers will be settled by next month."

Commerce Secretary Mahbubur Rahman said recovery was proving

Hasnain Khorshed, chief

India ready to rev up chipmaking

Industry pioneer says

AFP, New Delhi

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared India's "late entry" into the global semiconductor race, he pinned hopes on pioneers such as Vellayan Subbiah to create a chip innovation hub.

The chairman of CG Power, who oversees a newly commissioned semiconductor facility in western India, is seen as one of the early domestic champions of this strategic sector in the world's fastest-growing major economy.

"There has been more alignment between the government, policymakers, and business than I've ever seen in my working history," Subbiah, 56, told AFP.

"There's an understanding of where India needs to go, and the importance of having our own manufacturing."

As US President Donald Trump shakes global trade with tariffs and hard-nosed transactionalism, Modi has doubled down on self-reliance in critical technologies.

New Delhi, which flagged its push in 2021, has this year approved 10 semiconductor projects worth about \$18 billion in total, including two 3-nanometre design plants, among the most advanced.

Commercial production is slated to begin by the end of the year, with the market forecast to jump from \$38 billion in 2023 to nearly \$100 billion by 2030. Subbiah, whose CG Power is one of India's leading conglomerates, predicts "over \$100 billion, if not more", will flow into the industry across the value chain in the next five to seven years.

He said "symbiotic" public-private partnerships were "very exciting".

Ability to accelerate
Chips are viewed as key to growth and a source of geopolitical clout.

Dollar eases to one-week low

REUTERS, London

The dollar skinned one-week lows against major currencies on Wednesday as a US government shutdown unsettled markets and threatened to delay key jobs data, seen as crucial for Federal Reserve policy decisions.

The shutdown commenced hours after the Senate rejected a short-term spending measure that would have kept government operations afloat through November 21.

Senate Republican Leader John Thune said the chamber would vote again on the House-passed measure on Wednesday. The Senate is due to convene at 1400 GMT.

The dollar index, which tracks the US currency against six major peers, slipped 0.1 percent. The price action across the broader markets bore a few hallmarks of safe-haven buying, giving low-yielding currencies such as the Japanese yen a bid, while US Treasuries and gold held firm.

SAFE HAVEN OR NOT?
Rabobank chief currency strategist Jane Foley said it was tricky discerning if yen strength was driven by safe-haven demand or speculation about the Bank of Japan (BOJ) raising rates.

Govt to revamp fisheries policy eyeing chemical-free fish

SUKANTA HALDER

The interim government is seeking to introduce sweeping reforms in the fisheries sector, aiming to ensure safe fish free of chemical, microbiological and hazardous elements.

The draft aims to ensure chemical-free production, supply and stocking of fish and looks to address the growing threat of antimicrobial resistance (AMR).

The Department of Fisheries has drafted the National Fisheries Policy 2025 to that end, aiming to revise the decade-old national policy for the sector, which is the main provider of the country's protein needs.

The policy also aims to address the plight of climate refugees involved in fishing, funding at the local level, marine resource management, and the import-export of fish.

The draft has been submitted to the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock, with stakeholder consultations expected to begin shortly, confirmed Abdur Rouf, director general of the Department of Fisheries.

"Based on the feedback received, we will adjust the draft as necessary," he said.

Bangladesh, home to one of the world's richest collections of inland and marine water bodies, has seen rapid growth in aquaculture through hatcheries and bio-floc systems. In fiscal year 2023-24, the country produced more than 50 lakh tonnes of fish, according to official data. Nearly 60 percent came from aquaculture, compared with only 16 percent in the early 1980s.

But alongside this expansion, indiscriminate use of antibiotics has become a pressing concern. Government officials, experts, and policymakers have repeatedly warned that antibiotic overuse in fish farming contributes to AMR in bacteria, undermining both animal and human health.

The concern is not theoretical. A recent study published in *Nature* found that two-thirds of fish samples in Bangladesh carried antibiotic-resistant *Escherichia coli*, with the problem particularly acute in farmed fish. Researchers concluded that aquaculture environments serve as major reservoirs of multidrug-resistant, biofilm-forming bacteria, creating food safety and public health risks.

Officials say the new draft marks the

was largely overlooked in the past."

With a coastline of 710 kilometers, sovereignty over 354 nautical miles, and rights over a continental shelf area of 183,813 square kilometers, Bangladesh is at an advantage when it comes to using marine resources. However, experts have repeatedly pointed out that Bangladesh is failing to utilise that potential.

According to a 2018 World Bank report, Bangladesh's blue economy sector

strategies for mitigation and adaptation, recognising the sector's vulnerability to rising sea levels, salinity intrusion, and erratic weather. It proposes alternative employment schemes for climate refugees and a special disaster fund for rehabilitation, alongside insurance mechanisms to protect fishers and farmers.

Inland water bodies remain central to Bangladesh's fish production, covering 4.7 million hectares and supporting 260 native freshwater fish species. The policy recommends stricter monitoring of hatcheries, prohibiting low-quality feed, and strengthening processing facilities to meet modern consumer demand and boost exports.

It also calls for establishing a new laboratory system to ensure the quality of fish imports and exports, aligning Bangladesh with international safety standards. A dedicated wing within the ministry would oversee trade expansion, especially in marine resources beyond shrimp exports.

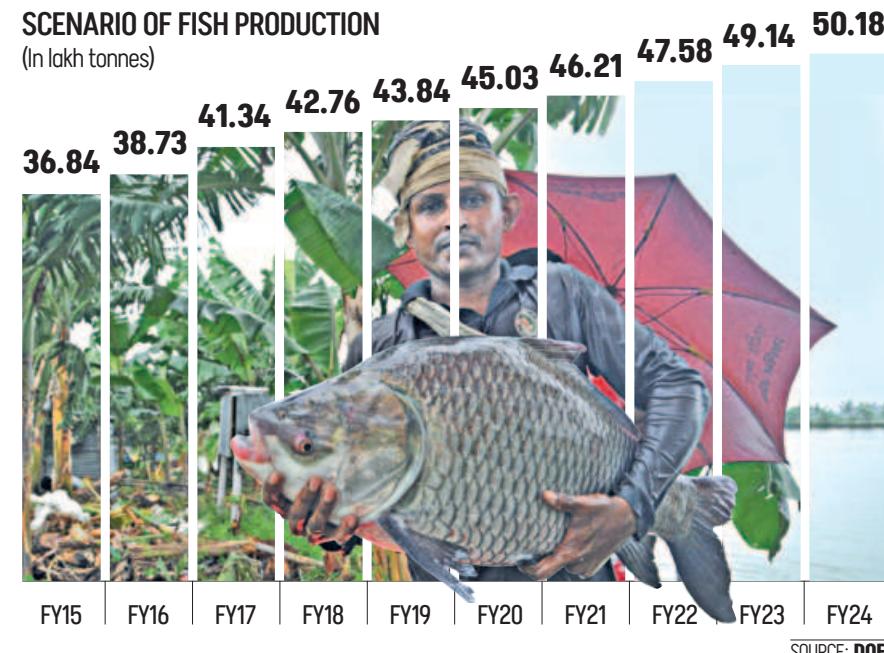
Fishers' welfare is also a priority. The draft proposes Vulnerable Group Feeding assistance during seasonal fishing bans, including the 58-day closure in the Bay of Bengal and jatka conservation periods in rivers.

Fish farmer Munjur Alam from Chapainawabganj welcomed the draft, describing it as "overall good," but noted that enforcement would be critical.

The policy highlights many important issues, but authorities must ensure strict implementation. There should be greater emphasis on harvesting fish from the sea using modern technology, rather than focusing only on shrimp exports," he said.

He also called for investments in fish processing and hatchery improvements, and a complete halt to harmful practices such as using growth hormones and poor quality animal feed.

He further stressed the need to strengthen fish processing to meet the demands of the new generation and enhance export potential.



first comprehensive revision of fisheries policy since 1998. Over the past 25 years, aquaculture has expanded dramatically, while new challenges ranging from climate change to resource depletion have intensified.

The new policy gives greater weight to marine and coastal issues, particularly in the context of the blue economy," Rouf said. "Our aim is to ensure the sustainable management of marine resources, which

contributes approximately 3 percent to its GDP. Marine waters are home to 475 fish species, 36 shrimp species, and other commercially valuable resources such as crabs, conchs, and algae.

Speaking at an event in Dhaka recently, Fisheries and Livestock Adviser Farida Akhter said, "Out of our total domestic fish production, just 30 percent comes from the sea."

The draft also introduces climate change

India central bank holds rates

REUTERS, Mumbai

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) kept its policy rate unchanged on Wednesday, signalling room to lower rates in December as it assesses the impact of domestic tax cuts and punitive US tariffs on the South Asian economy.

The central bank said low inflation had "opened up policy space for further supporting growth," after its six-member Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) voted unanimously to hold the repo rate at 5.50 percent and retained a "neutral" policy stance.

India has faced US tariffs of up to 50 percent on key exports, ranging from textiles to chemicals, but consumer tax cuts announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government are expected to bolster growth and suppress inflation.

"The current macroeconomic conditions and the outlook have opened up policy space for further supporting growth," RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra said in a video address.

"However, the MPC noted that the impact of the front-loaded monetary policy actions and the recent fiscal measures are still playing out," he said.

The central bank had cut the repo rate by a total of 100 basis points in the first half of 2025, but paused at its previous meeting in August.

Two members of the MPC were in favour of changing the stance to accommodative, the committee's written statement showed.

A Reuters poll had predicted rates would remain on hold, although some economists highlighted subdued inflation and risks to growth as reasons for a potential cut.

India's benchmark 10-year bond yield was 1 basis point higher at 6.5901 percent, while the rupee was marginally firmer at 88.71 per dollar and equity indexes were slightly stronger.

READ MORE ON B2

Eurozone inflation accelerates

AFP, Brussels, Belgium

Eurozone inflation edged up in September buoyed by energy costs, official data showed Wednesday, reinforcing expectations the European Central Bank will not make further interest rate cuts this year.

Inflation rose to 2.2 percent last month, from two percent in August, the EU's statistics agency said, above the ECB's two percent target.

The figure was in line with predictions by analysts surveyed by Bloomberg, but economists for FactSet had expected inflation to rise to 2.3 percent.

Core inflation, which strips out volatile energy, food, alcohol and tobacco prices, was also unchanged at 2.3 percent, as economists for both Bloomberg and FactSet had forecast. It remained stable despite services price rises accelerating to 3.2 percent in September, from 3.1 percent in August.

Energy costs, however, fell by 0.4 percent in September -- a significantly smaller decline than the 2.0 percent recorded in August, Eurostat data showed.

Food, alcohol and tobacco price rises eased to 3.0 percent in September, from 3.2 percent the previous month. The September figure will cement the ECB's plans for interest rates, said Riccardo Marcelli Fabiani, senior economist at Oxford Economics.

"Only a strong surprise in inflation could spur a cut this year," he said.

Inflation in Germany and France, the EU's biggest economies, also accelerated in September to 2.4 percent and 1.1 percent respectively, the agency said.

Gold hits record high on US govt shutdown

REUTERS

Gold prices rose to hit a new record high on Wednesday, supported by safe-haven demand as the US government shut down most operations, while growing expectations of a Federal Reserve rate cut this month added to the metal's appeal.

Spot gold climbed 0.9 percent at \$3,891.96 per ounce, as of 0844 GMT, after hitting an all-time high of \$3,895.09 earlier in the session.

US gold futures for December delivery gained 1.2 percent to \$3,918.60.

The dollar index fell to 0.2 percent against its peers, its lowest level in over one week, making greenback-priced gold more affordable for overseas buyers.

The dollar is weakening on the back of expectations of an increasingly dovish Fed. This dynamic has accelerated after a failed attempt to pass a spending bill triggered a government shutdown which could weigh on economic



(NFP) report due on Friday.

Non-yielding gold, viewed as a safe-haven asset in times of economic and geopolitical uncertainty, thrives in a low-interest rate environment.

"Most likely the Fed doesn't really need (the NFP) report to make up its mind because US interest rates are still above the neutral rate, so monetary policy is restrictive and if the economy is slowing, you need to get towards the neutral rate at least," said Carsten Menke, an analyst at Julius Baer.

Investors are pricing in a 95 percent chance of a rate cut this month, per the CME FedWatch Tool.

The ADP national employment report, due later in the day, is expected to offer additional labour market insights.

Elsewhere, spot silver gained 1.5 percent to \$47.39 per ounce, a more than 14-year high. Platinum rose 0.6 percent to \$1,583.75, while palladium was up 0.5 percent at \$1,263.44.

Hit by Trump tariffs, rest of world races to forge new trade alliances

REUTERS, Brussels

US President Donald Trump's import tariffs have breathed life into dormant free trade talks across the globe and driven alliances at an unrivalled pace between partners seeking to offset lost exports to the United States.

Since Trump's re-election last November, the European Union has struck three free trade agreements -- with South American bloc Mercosur, Mexico and Indonesia -- and has its sights on a fourth, with India, by the end of this year.

The EU is not alone. Mercosur has sealed a free trade deal with the four-nation European Free Trade Area and relaunched negotiations with Canada that were stalled in 2021.

India and New Zealand revived talks after a decade-long hiatus, while the United Arab Emirates signed three trade agreements in a single day in January.

Brussels has been clear it sees new alliances as part of its response to "unjustified" US tariffs of broadly 15 percent on EU goods and to Chinese oversupply and export restrictions on critical mineral the EU needs for its green transition.

COUNTRIES LOOKING BEYOND US

The new trade pacts may not fully compensate for losses in commerce with a more protectionist America -- time will tell -- but rival economies have been spurred into action nonetheless.



The European Commission's High Representative for Foreign Affairs Kaja Kallas and Commissioner for Trade Maros Sefcovic present EU-Mercosur and EU-Mexico trade agreements, for formal approval by the European Parliament and European Union members, in Brussels on September 3.

EU trade chief Maros Sefcovic told lawmakers last month in a debate about the one-sided EU-US tariff deal struck at the end of July that the United States, which represented 17 percent of EU trade last year, was "not the only game in town".

"We also need to take care of the other 83 percent. That means continuing our efforts to diversify our relations," he said.

The message has been taken on board by countries previously reluctant to open their markets, including India and France, whose opposition to the EU-Mercosur deal seems to have softened.

The trend has also been welcomed by World Trade Organization Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, as long as the agreements concur with WTO rules.

"Members are negotiating more agreements with each other, that helps to diversify trade, it supports the WTO. It's not in competition because most of these agreements are built on our platform," she said last month.

SHORT-TERM IMPACT OF DEALS LIMITED

However, will new alliances offset US tariffs?

In the short-term, no. The impact of US tariffs is immediate, while the benefits of new trade agreements are years away, because of potentially lengthy approval processes and tariff cuts that are often staged over five to 10 years.

Investment to take advantage of those benefits could kick in sooner though.

READ MORE ON B2

Slow GDP growth poses serious social consequences

SALEKEEN IBRAHIM

The national economy of Bangladesh is facing one of its toughest tests in decades. The provisional GDP growth for this fiscal year is only 3.97 percent, the lowest in 34 years apart from the pandemic period. It is true that a sluggish growth rate can have different interpretations when compared with previous years, but few can deny the adverse state of many economic indicators even after more than a year of the interim government.

The numbers published by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics tell a grim story. Growth has fallen well below the revised target, dragged down by weak agriculture, slower services and fragile industry. While much of the blame is directed at the previous government's mismanagement, the interim administration cannot escape responsibility. Failures in policy consistency, governance and financial management have magnified the slowdown. The cracks in the system are now more visible, and ordinary people are paying the price.

We have seen repeated uncertainties during this period, with shifting rules, sudden regulatory changes and selective enforcement that have reflected a lack of institutional trust and policy clarity. Without transparency and consistency, investors lose confidence. Law and order and the reliability of infrastructure have deteriorated. Exporters, especially in the readymade garment sector, have faced power cuts, port delays and transport disruption. Smooth trade operations have become a big hurdle.

Credit growth has contracted sharply. Domestic credit growth fell to 8.03 percent year-on-year in April 2025, down from 11.19 percent a year earlier. Weak private sector credit growth means less economic activity and fewer investments in machinery, jobs or business expansion.

Inflation has remained stubbornly high throughout this period. Rising living costs not only squeeze households but also erode business competitiveness by raising input prices. We have also seen strikes and disruption at the National Board of Revenue. As a result, revenue receipts grew by only 3.96 percent in July-April FY25, far below what was needed to ensure stable social support. Weak finances and sluggish revenue collection mean the government has little room to stimulate growth.

Slow economic growth has serious consequences. Unemployment rises as businesses freeze hiring, cut jobs and reduce costs. Young graduates are entering a shrinking job market, while semi-skilled workers remain underemployed. Household incomes are falling while prices continue to climb. High inflation erodes savings and purchasing power, hitting the poor and middle class hardest. Families are being forced to cut back on essentials such as food, healthcare and education.

At the national level, exports and foreign investment are suffering compared with earlier years. Investors remain cautious because of political uncertainty and the fragile rule of law. Experts say that Bangladesh's vital RMG industry is still at risk of losing competitiveness. Fresh foreign direct investment has dried up. Meanwhile, government debt pressures are growing. With lower tax receipts and rising borrowing, interest payments consume funds that should have been allocated to health, education and development. Perhaps most alarmingly, public trust is eroding. As people and the younger generation see inflation eating away at their wages and no new opportunities on the horizon, frustration builds. That fuels instability, which in turn further weakens both the economy and society.

Yet there is hope, genuine hope, if action is taken with courage. Bangladesh has overcome crises before. From famine to flood, from political turmoil to stability, the country has always shown resilience. Low GDP growth is not just a number. It is a warning sign of deep cracks in the national foundation.

Left unchecked, it could lead to joblessness, brain drain and deeper poverty. But if we act proactively, it could become the spark that forces urgent reform and revitalisation. Clarity in policy, fairness in justice, trust in institutions and targeted support for those pushed to the margins can reverse the drift.

The writer is a senior banker