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Star BUSINESS

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The interim government has withdrawn a requirement for outsourced personnel to renew approvals for working in annual development programmes (ADP).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

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.

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.

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

During the Covid pandemic lockdowns in 2020, online shopping gained huge popularity in Bangladesh, with platforms such as eOrange, Evaly, Qcoom and Alesha Mart collecting huge sums in advance from customers, 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 Qcoom in June 2021. The goods never arrived, and he is still waiting for his refund.

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 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.

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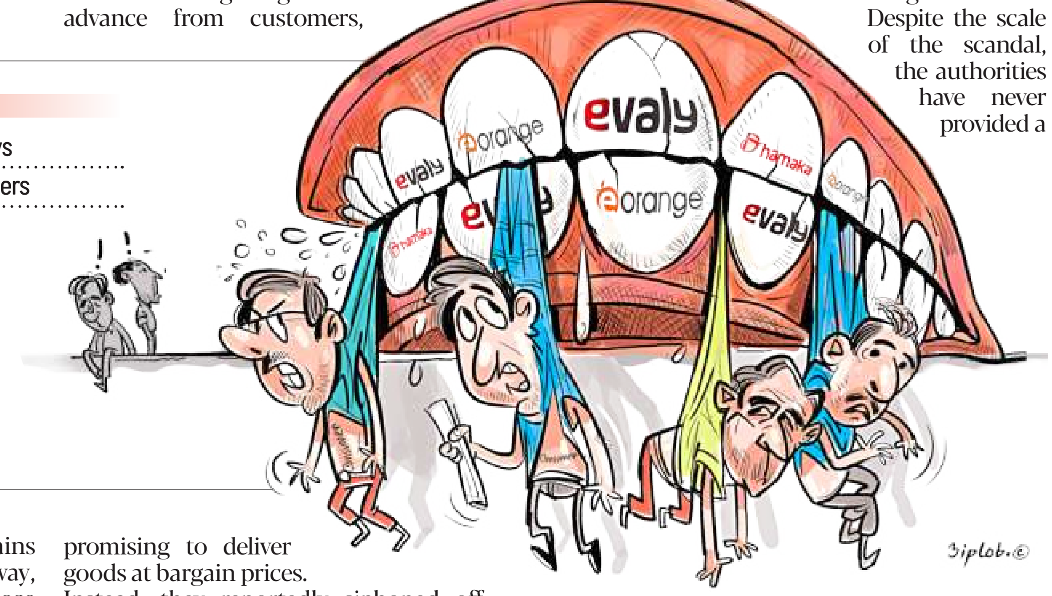
TAKEAWAYS

- 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



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

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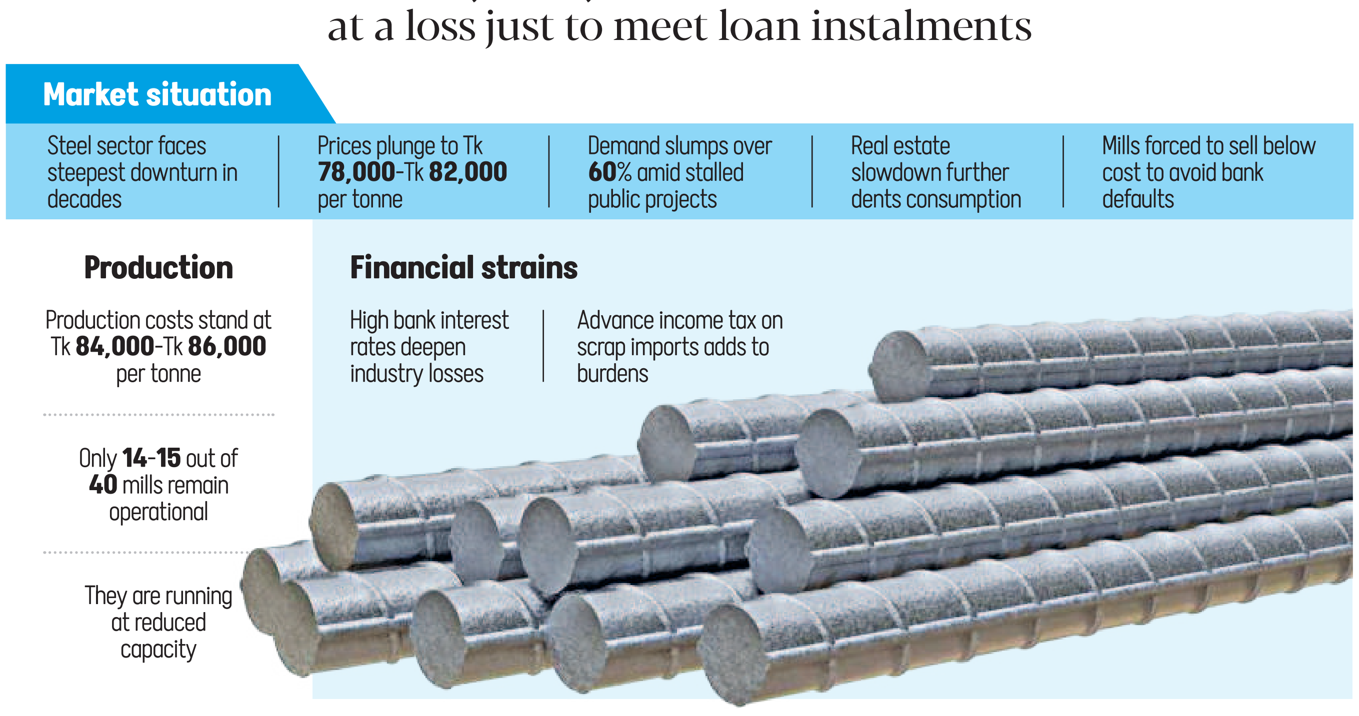
Construction slump pushes steel industry into deep crisis

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



JAGARAN 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.

Millers 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 Metrocem 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."

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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 exporters and importers, 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.