

# star BUSINESS

Robi won't take part in spectrum auction

MAHMUDUL HASAN

Telecom operator Robi Axiata has withdrawn its name from the upcoming auction of the 700-megahertz (MHz) spectrum, leaving market leader Grameenphone as the only participating operator.

Robi confirmed the decision in a statement to The Daily Star yesterday following queries about its intentions regarding the auction.

"Following a comprehensive technical and strategic review, we have decided to withdraw our application to participate in the current 700 MHz spectrum auction," said Shahid Alam, chief corporate and regulatory affairs officer at Robi.

"The 700 MHz band remains a strategically important asset for the future evolution of our network. However, based on our current network priorities, deployment roadmap, and market conditions, the timing of this auction does not align with our immediate operational requirements," he said.

Major General (Retd) Md Emdad ul Bari, chairman of Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC), confirmed the development.

He said the BTRC will go ahead with the plan, as preparations for the auction have been ongoing since 2024.

He added that Robi requested spectrum from a separate band, and the BTRC may consider it.

Earlier, the country's largest mobile operator, Grameenphone, and the second-largest, Robi Axiata, applied to participate in the auction scheduled for January 21.

However, Robi requested a one-month extension of the auction timeline.

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## Spinners, apparel exporters differ over extra duty on yarn imports

To decide the way forward, Trade and Tariff Commission is meeting today with spinners, garment makers and knitwear manufacturers

### WHO SAYS WHAT

LOCAL SPINNERS (BTMA)	Seek 20% safeguard duty on certain cotton imports	Demand removal of bonded warehouse facility for such imports	Say they're sitting on Tk 12,000cr unsold stock	Accuse India of dumping yarn in Bangladesh
BGMEA and BKMEA	Oppose the duty on yarn imports	Say higher yarn prices will hurt production	Claim Bangladesh's exports will suffer	



### NUMBERS AND FACTS

- Yarn under discussion: 100% cotton, blended, 20-30 count
- Bangladesh imported \$2b yarn from India in FY26
- Imports from India rose 137% last year
- Bangladesh received 44% of India's exports
- Domestic mills running at 50% capacity
- Around 50 local spinning mills closed in recent years

### REFAYET ULLAH MIRDHA

Apparel and knitwear manufacturers have opposed a proposed 20 percent safeguard tariff after local spinners asked the Bangladesh Trade and Tariff Commission to recommend it on imports of 100 percent cotton and blended yarns in the 20-30 count range.

The manufacturers said such a tariff would force them to buy local yarn at higher prices, hurt production, and ultimately affect exports.

Local spinners, however, argued that the safeguard duty is necessary to protect the domestic industry. In the last week of December, they accused India of dumping cheap yarn in Bangladesh and said they were sitting on Tk 12,000 crore of unsold stock.

Domestic spinners claim they can meet the entire national demand for 100 percent cotton and blended yarns, including PC,

CVC, PV, and grey melange.

In addition to the tariff, the Bangladesh Textile Mills Association (BTMA) requested the cancellation of the bonded warehouse facility for these yarns, according to multiple sources familiar with the matter.

Against this backdrop, the Bangladesh Trade and Tariff Commission, the statutory body responsible for preventing dumping of foreign goods, convened a meeting with spinners, garment makers and knitwear manufacturers today.

The commission had already held a session earlier this week on the proposed safeguard measure.

The proposal has drawn opposition from the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA).

In separate letters to the commission, both trade bodies

said imposing a 20 percent safeguard duty on yarn imports would put the export-oriented garment sector in serious trouble.

They said the sector will lose its global competitiveness if yarn prices rise as a result of the safeguard duty. They called on the government to improve gas and power supply to industrial units so mills can produce sufficient yarn, and requested incentives to make the domestic mills more competitive.

In the last week of December, Showkat Aziz Russell, president of the BTMA, said at a press conference in Dhaka that local spinning mills were left with Tk 12,000 crore of unsold yarn as cheap imports from India flooded the market.

He said that yarn imports from India rose 137 percent last year, being sold below domestic prices, and that nearly 50 local spinning mills have closed in recent years after failing to survive the competition.

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## Bangladesh resumes US corn imports after 8 years

Import resumes amid lower prices and trade-balancing push



### PRICING

Traders say US corn was \$3-\$5 cheaper per tonne

### MARKET CONTEXT

Corn is Bangladesh's second-largest grain after rice

### SUPPLIER BREAKDOWN (2024-25)

Brazil supplied 93% of Bangladesh's corn imports

Argentina and Pakistan accounted for 4% and 2%, respectively

### BUYER PREFERENCE

Brazilian corn is preferred for its competitive price and quality

### SUKANTA HALDER

Bangladeshi feed millers have imported corn from the United States for the first time in eight years, citing competitive prices, quality considerations and broader efforts to narrow the bilateral trade gap.

The shipment, carrying 57,855 tonnes of corn, arrived at Chattogram port yesterday, according to a press release from the US Embassy in Dhaka. The last such import from the US was in 2018.

Traders said US corn was priced \$3 to \$5 per tonne cheaper than corn from Bangladesh's usual suppliers, while meeting quality requirements.

Corn is Bangladesh's second-largest grain crop after rice in terms of acreage and production.

Even so, the country remains heavily dependent on imports to meet feed demand.

The renewed corn imports come amid broader trade engagement between the two countries. The US had earlier reduced its reciprocal tariff rate for Bangladesh to 20 percent from an initial 37 percent after Dhaka agreed to increase imports from the US to help narrow an annual trade gap exceeding \$6.2 billion.

Bangladesh has also signed a memorandum of understanding to import 660,000 tonnes of US wheat, of which around 300,000 tonnes have already been received.

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## Passport endorsement charges capped at Tk 300

### STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Licensed money changers will now be allowed to charge a maximum of Tk 300 for passport endorsement for outgoing Bangladeshi passengers, regardless of how much foreign currency is sold, according to a circular issued by the central bank yesterday.

Until now, there was no fixed ceiling on endorsement fees. Many money changers were accused of charging Tk 500 to Tk 1,000, or even more from passengers.

Under the Guidelines on Foreign Exchange Transactions 2018, licensed money changers are allowed to sell foreign currency notes, coins and travellers' cheques to resident Bangladeshi nationals travelling abroad under their annual private travel entitlement.

Each transaction must be endorsed on the passport and, where applicable, the air ticket, bearing the seal and signature of the authorised official of the money changer.

In yesterday's notification, the Bangladesh Bank said money changers may collect an endorsement

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## E-VAT refund launched amid cautious optimism from traders

### STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The National Board of Revenue (NBR) has launched an online system that allows value-added tax (VAT) refunds to be credited directly to taxpayers' bank accounts, a move officials say will reduce delays and ease long-standing administrative hassles.

Traders and tax experts cautiously welcomed the move, warning that digitisation alone is unlikely to fix chronic delays unless implementation improves.

Under existing regulations, VAT refunds are required to be disbursed within three months. In practice, however, refunds can take up to a year, NBR officials admitted.

NBR Chairman Md Abdur Rahman Khan inaugurated the platform, named "e-VAT", yesterday at the NBR's headquarters in Dhaka by transferring Tk 45.35 lakh to three taxpayers from three VAT commissionerates through the new system.

From now on, taxpayers can apply for refunds online through their monthly VAT returns submitted via the platform. Once the relevant VAT commissionerate verifies the claim, the refundable amount will be credited directly to the taxpayer's designated bank account.

"If refunds can be made without suffering or harassment, there should be no mindset that refunds must be withheld to protect revenue collection," Khan said. "That is not our approach. We want a fully transparent system with no scope for arbitrary discretion."

He said the NBR has so far received 115 online refund applications, of which three have been settled. "The remaining claims will be resolved gradually."

Khan also disclosed that the revenue authority is currently carrying around Tk 4,000 crore in outstanding refund liabilities across taxes and VAT.

"We have launched the VAT refund system now, and the tax refund process will begin soon," he also said.

Khan also said taxpayers would no longer need to repeatedly visit VAT offices to follow up on claims, and that the NBR plans to make VAT return submission mandatory from next year after amending the VAT law.

Meanwhile, business groups and tax analysts broadly welcomed the initiative as a step towards modernising revenue administration, but many cautioned that without strong monitoring, system integrity and institutional accountability, the platform could end up replicating existing bottlenecks in digital form.

Snehasish Barua, a chartered accountant and director of SMAC Advisory Services Ltd, said VAT refunds usually arise when taxes paid at the import stage exceed a firm's actual VAT liability.

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## Govt pushes 10 state firms, MNCs to list on bourses

### STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The interim government has sent a strong message to 10 companies, including several multinationals and state-owned firms, urging them to list on Bangladesh's stock exchanges, while the relevant ministries have agreed to offload a portion of their shares in state-run companies.

"Our main target is to bring state-owned companies and multinational companies (MNCs) into the share market, which will boost investor confidence," Finance Adviser Salehuddin Ahmed told journalists yesterday after a meeting with advisers and secretaries from the industry, commerce, and energy ministries.

The government has initially identified ten companies for listing -- Unilever, Nestlé, Novartis, Syngenta, Synovia (formerly Sanofi Bangladesh), Karnaphuli Fertilizer Company, Pashchimanchal Gas Company, North West Power Generation, Sylhet Gas Fields, and Karnaphuli Gas Distribution.

The adviser said that the companies have agreed "in principle," but the final decision rests with their boards. "It is not possible to force them to list, but their boards will have to make the decision," he added.

Asked why the listing might succeed this time after being long overdue, the adviser said, "No government has gone this far, and this time ministries have agreed to offload."

He added that the industry ministry, which controls most state-run companies, is supportive of the listings, and other ministries have also agreed. "Now, the respective boards will make the decision. I have ordered them to do it fast," the adviser said.

Abu Ahmed, an economist and chairman of the Investment Corporation of Bangladesh, welcomed the move. "A strong message has been sent to MNCs that Bangladesh wants them to list. For state-run companies, the respective ministries have agreed to list them, but the problem is that they are taking time. I don't see any reason for the delay in direct listing," he said.

He added, "If Nestlé can be listed on the Bombay Stock Exchange, then what is the problem with listing here? Unilever is also listed on the same exchange and other international exchanges. If they want tax incentives, they can be offered. If they don't get listed, higher taxes should be levied."

Officials said the government, which holds roughly 40 percent stake in most multinationals, plans to offload at least five percent of shares to the public. Currently, 13 state-owned firms are listed, with Bangladesh Submarine Cables being the last company to join the bourse in 2012.



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## CPA would strengthen Bangladesh-EU ties

Top official says

### STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Paola Pampaloni, the visiting acting managing director for Asia-Pacific at the European External Action Service (EEAS), yesterday said the comprehensive partnership agreement (CPA) between Bangladesh and the EU would pave the way for deeper ties between the two partners and open up significant opportunities in trade and investment.

Pampaloni made the remarks during a courtesy call on Chief Adviser (CA) Professor Muhammad Yunus at the State Guest House Jamuna in Dhaka.

During the meeting, the two sides discussed issues concerning Bangladesh-EU relations, including negotiations on the framework agreement on the CPA, the upcoming general elections and referendum, combating illegal migration, and expanding trade and investment, according to a statement from the Chief Adviser's Office.

Pampaloni noted that the initiation of negotiations on the CPA in November 2024 came after 20 years during which there had been a general partnership agreement.

She congratulated the chief adviser for the "incredible and massive" work he has undertaken since assuming leadership of the interim government in August 2024, particularly in carrying out important reforms to which the EU, as Bangladesh's political and largest commercial partner, attaches great importance, and for ensuring peace and stability at a critical juncture for the country.

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PHOTO: MOSTAFA SHABUJ

## Farmers urged to safeguard crops, livestock amid cold wave

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

A cold wave sweeping through several districts and divisions across Bangladesh has put standing crops, horticulture, and livestock at significant risk, prompting authorities to issue urgent advisories for farmers in the worst-affected areas.

The Bangladesh Meteorological Department said the cold spell is moving over Tangail, Faridpur, Madaripur, Gopalganj, Kishoreganj, Manikganj, Narsingdi, Narayanganj, Netrakona, Moulvibazar, Laxmipur and Cumilla, as well as across the Rajshahi, Rangpur, Khulna and Barisal divisions, and may persist in the coming days.

In response, the Bangladesh Agro-Meteorological Information Service issued urgent advisories to minimise damage to crops and farm assets during excessive cold and fog.

Farmers have been urged to provide light but regular irrigation to fruit trees, cover young plants with straw or polythene to block cold winds, and

protect livestock and poultry sheds with burlap or black cloth while keeping high-voltage bulbs lit to maintain warmth.

They have also been advised to take extra care of boro rice seedbeds during the cold spell. Nurseries should be covered with transparent polythene from 3pm to 10am, ensuring it does not touch the seedlings.

Dew should be removed every morning, and 3-5 centimetres of water kept in the seedbed at night and refreshed during the day.

Cold conditions can cause seedling burn. At an early stage, seedlings and soil should be sprayed with approved fungicides such as Emister Top or Septima.

Onion and garlic crops may face purple blotch and tip burn in foggy weather. Preventive sprays of Ridomil Gold or Mancozeb are advised.

Pulses, mustard and potato fields should also be monitored closely and treated with recommended fungicides at regular intervals to prevent disease outbreaks.

### জয়পুরহাট গার্লস ক্যাডেট কলেজ, জয়পুরহাট বাস নিলামে বিক্রয়ের দরপত্র বিজ্ঞপ্তি

০১	দরপত্র বিজ্ঞপ্তি নং	০৬/২০২৫-২৬	
০২	দরপত্র বিক্রয়ের বাস নিলামের ছান ও ঠিকানা	জয়পুরহাট গার্লস ক্যাডেট কলেজ, জয়পুরহাট	
০৩	দরপত্র নিলামের শেষ তারিখ ও সময়	১৪ জানুয়ারি ২০২৬ তারিখ বেলা ১১.৩০ ঘটিকা পর্যন্ত।	
০৪	দরপত্র খেলার তারিখ, সময় ও ছান	১৪ জানুয়ারি ২০২৬ তারিখ বেলা ১২০০ ঘটিকা, জয়পুরহাট গার্লস ক্যাডেট কলেজ, জয়পুরহাট।	
নিম্নলিখিত পথের বিবরণঃ			
ক্র/নং	গাড়ির বিবরণ	শিল্পজগতের মূল্য (অক্ষেত্রবেষ্টন)	আন্তিমামি টাকা (ক্ষেত্রবেষ্টনেরযোগে)
০৫	বাস ঃ নেজিভেশন নম্বৰ- জয়পুরহাট-স-১১-০০০১, প্রত্যক্ষকরণঃ ট্রান্স ফার্ম লিঃ, যানেকেনোঃ অধিনিবাস, টেকোরি সনঃ ১০০৬, চেলিস নং-৩৮৯০৬৫৫৫১১৮৫, ইঞ্জিন নং-৫০M-৬২৪৪৩৮২২, জালানীঃ টিজেল, সিলিংয়ার সংখ্যা-০৬ টি	৫০০.০০	দাখিলকৃত মূল্যের ১০%
বিষয়ে নির্দেশনা/বিবরণঃ			
১।	অঞ্চলীয় ক্ষেত্রগুলিকে দরপত্রের সাথে আন্তিমামি বাসকে দাখিলকৃত দরের ১০% টাকা অর্থাত, জয়পুরহাট গার্লস ক্যাডেট কলেজ বরাবর অঞ্চলীয় বাসকে প্রিপারি, জয়পুরহাট ক্যাডেট কলেজ সাথা, জয়পুরহাট অনুসূচিত বাসকে ক্ষেত্রকে অর্থের জমা দিতে হবে।		
২।	সকল দরদাতাকে যথাযথ কর্তৃপক্ষের অনুমতিন প্রাপ্তির ১০ দিনের মধ্যে সম্পূর্ণ টাকা পরিশোধ শুরুর বাস দেলিভার নিতে হবে।		
৩।	অঞ্চলীয় নিলামে অঞ্চলগুলিকে ক্ষেত্রে উপস্থিত হয়ে গাড়িটি সরেজমিনে পরিদর্শন করতে পারবেন। প্রবর্তীতে এ বাপ্তারে উপস্থিত কোন আপত্তি প্রযোগের হাতে না।		
৪।	কেন্দ্রীয় করার স্বত্ত্বালোচন যে কোন দরপত্র বাসকে করার ক্ষমতা কলেজ কর্তৃপক্ষ সংরক্ষণ করেন।		
৫।	সকল দরদাতাকে চূড়ান্ত মূল্যের উপর সরকারি বিধি মোতাবেক ভাট্ট ও আয়কর পরিশোধ করতে হবে।		
আই.এস.পি.আর/সেনা/১৭			
অধ্যক্ষ জয়পুরহাট গার্লস ক্যাডেট কলেজ			
GD-45			

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বিশ্ববিদ্যালয় মন্ত্রী কমিশন	University Grants Commission of Bangladesh
আগারগাঁও, শেরে বাংলা নগর, ঢাকা-১২০৭	website: www.ugc.gov.bd

Ref. No: 37.01.0000.000.114.07.0001.03 Date: 07/01/2026

### e-Tender Notice

The following e-Tenders are invited in the National e-GP System Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) for the procurement of:

SL No	Tender ID No	Reference No	Description of Goods/Works	Publishing Date	Last Selling Date and Time	Closing Date and Time	Opening Date and Time
01	1207767	37.01.0000.000.114.07.0001.03	Supply and Installation of RFID Access Control System and Related Services to UGC Building.	08/01/2026 11:00	22/01/2026 12:00	22/01/2026 15:00	22/01/2026 15:00

These are online Tender, where only e-Tender will be accepted in the National e-GP portal and no offline/hard copies will be accepted.

To submit e-Tender, registration in the National e-GP System Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) is required.

The fees for downloading the e-Tender Documents from the National e-GP System Portal have to be deposited online through any registered Bank Branches.

Further information and guidelines are available in the National e-GP System Portal and from e-GP help desk ([helpdesk@eprocure.gov.bd](mailto:helpdesk@eprocure.gov.bd)).

For more details please contact to the PE's Support Desk (01813574452).

## Postpone NEIR Mobile phone traders urge govt

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Mobile phone traders yesterday formed a human chain demanding the postponement of the implementation of the National Equipment Identity Register (NEIR) system and the release of colleagues arrested earlier over protests against the initiative.

The demonstration was held in front of the Bashundhara City Shopping Mall in Dhaka.

The traders also demanded the withdrawal of cases filed by the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) against mobile phone traders, the release of those detained in connection with the vandalism at the BTRC office, a reduction of total taxes on mobile phone imports to 10-12 percent, permission to import used mobile phones, and simplification of the handset import process.

Earlier on Tuesday, traders staged a similar human chain in front of Jamuna Future Park in Dhaka.

## E-VAT refund

FROM PAGE B1

"For example, if a business's VAT liability is Tk 20 but it pays Tk 30 as advance tax, the excess Tk 10 is refundable," he said.

Refunds can also result from double VAT deductions on the same service or when exporters pay VAT or advance tax on imported inputs despite exports being zero-rated.

While an online system could make the process easier, Barua said its effectiveness would ultimately depend on the integrity of those operating it.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, an NBR official acknowledged that currently, VAT refunds

often take six to 12 months, even though annual refund applications typically amount to Tk 450 crore to Tk 500 crore on average.

Mohammad Hatem, president of the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association, said the new system could reduce harassment if it functions as intended.

"If the refund process genuinely goes online, businesses will be encouraged to apply, and we will motivate others to do the same," he said, adding that he had never applied for a refund due to lengthy paperwork, multiple approvals and informal payments.

He also noted that although fully export-oriented factories are entitled to VAT refunds on gas and electricity bills, most avoid applying because the process is cumbersome. "Even when pursued, refunds can take four to five months, or even longer."

Syed Mushequeur Rahman, member of the NBR's VAT audit wing, said the law mandates refunds within 90 days. "While processing often takes seven to 10 days, it must not exceed three months," he said, adding that a 24-point checklist is verified before refunds are approved to ensure compliance with legal requirements.

## Spinners, apparel exporters

FROM PAGE B1

While apparel makers and knitwear manufacturers in their letters said that the government cannot impose such a measure on any particular country under World Trade Organization (WTO) rules, Russell also said the BTMA does not want a 20 percent safeguard duty targeting any single country.

"It is not possible to impose such a tariff on a particular country under WTO rules," he said. Instead, he called for subsidies on the use of local

yarn to make the sector more competitive.

He told The Daily Star yesterday that the amount of stockpiled yarn has decreased somewhat as spinning mills have reduced production due to low demand.

Local spinners are operating at around 50 percent capacity because of low gas pressure, he added.

According to Russell, the total investment in the garment and primary textile sectors is more than \$75 billion, including

\$23 billion in the primary textile sector. Combined, the two sectors contribute \$40 billion in exports.

BTMA leaders said Bangladesh imported \$2 billion worth of yarn from India in fiscal year 2025-26, with local mills consuming 1,600 tonnes daily. From April to October 2025, imports reached \$950 million.

They said Bangladesh has become the largest destination for Indian yarn exports, receiving 44 percent of the total, while Cambodia ranks second at 21 percent.

## CPA would strengthen

FROM PAGE B1  
Yunus described the CPA as one of the most important agreements for Bangladesh and said it would "solidify" Bangladesh-EU relations.

Pampaloni said the head of the EU Election Observation Mission would arrive in Bangladesh later this week and is expected to hold a series of meetings with political leaders and relevant authorities.

Pampaloni stressed the importance of a peaceful

election, saying Bangladesh-EU relations could reach new heights following a successful democratic transition, ushering in a new era of engagement between Dhaka and the world's largest economic bloc.

Lutfey Siddiqi, special envoy of the chief adviser, Lamia Morshed, SDG coordinator and senior secretary, and Michael Miller, the European Union ambassador to Bangladesh, were also present at the meeting.

He also noted that assurances from US agricultural representatives regarding logistical and quality support helped reduce risks.

While the decision also aligned with efforts to narrow Bangladesh's trade deficit with the US, Tutul stressed that cost savings remained the primary consideration.

Sourcing strategies, he said, change from year to year depending on crop quality, regional demand and price competitiveness.

Rakibur Rahman Tutul, managing director of corn importer Nahar Agro Group, said the company opted for US corn this year after finding it offered the best balance of price and quality through a bidding process.

He said Brazilian corn was priced at around \$250 per tonne, while US suppliers undercut that by \$3 to \$4 per tonne.

Although shipping from the US takes longer, around 46 days compared with about 30 days from Brazil or Argentina, the company determined it had sufficient inventory to absorb the delay, he added.

Tutul said such decisions depend heavily on supply-chain planning, noting that longer shipping routes are avoided when stock levels are tight.

### Government of The People's Republic of Bangladesh Bangladesh Police Principal's Office Bangladesh Police Academy Sardah, Rajshahi [www.bpa.police.gov.bd](http://www.bpa.police.gov.bd)

### e-Tender Notice

Memo No: BPA/Admin/230

Date: 07-01-2026

For financial year 2025-2026, e-Tender is invited in the National e-GP portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) for the procurement of

SL. No	Description	Tender ID	Procurement Method	Scheduled Tender Publication Date & Time	Tender Opening Date & Time


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## Economy might have regained pace in Dec: PMI

### STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Bangladesh's economy might have regained pace in December, signalling a slightly faster pace of economic expansion, supported mainly by continued growth in agriculture, manufacturing and services, according to the Bangladesh Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI).

The December reading of PMI rose by 0.2 points month-on-month to 54.2 from 54 the previous month, said a press release by the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Dhaka (MCCI), and the Policy Exchange Bangladesh (PEB). In October, the PMI reading was 61.8.

The PMI is a forward-looking indicator used globally to gauge economic direction. A reading above 50 indicates expansion, while a reading below 50 indicates contraction.

Agriculture posted its fourth consecutive month of expansion and at an accelerated rate, emerging as the strongest-performing sector, the release said.

"The latest PMI readings indicate a marginal expansion of the economy, driven by strong agricultural sector performance," said M Masrur Reaz, chairman and chief executive officer of Policy Exchange Bangladesh.

The latest survey showed stronger expansion in new business, overall activity, employment and input costs. However, order backlogs continued to contract, albeit reflecting demand pressures easing only gradually.

Manufacturing remained in expansion for the 16th straight month, though the pace slowed marginally.

Positive readings were recorded across most key indicators, including new orders, new exports, factory output, input purchases, imports, input prices, employment, and supplier deliveries.

The finished goods index returned to expansion, while order backlogs showed a slower rate of contraction, indicating some improvement in demand conditions.

In contrast, the construction sector slipped back into marginal contraction after three consecutive months of growth.

The new business index contracted at a faster rate, while construction activity and employment posted slower expansion. Input costs rose at a slightly quicker pace.

Order backlogs continued to contract for the fifth consecutive month, though the rate of contraction eased.

The services sector extended its expansion streak to 15 months, with growth marginally faster than in November. Employment and input costs remained in expansion territory.

However, contraction was recorded in new business, business activity and order backlogs, pointing to softer demand conditions in parts of the sector.



Months-long locomotive shortage disrupted Chattogram-Dhaka freight trains, creating a huge container backlog and raising costs for importers, but operations are now resuming with the backlog expected to clear soon.

PHOTO: STAR/FILE

## Locomotive shortage disrupts Ctg-Dhaka rail freight

DWAIPAYAN BARUA, Ctg

Container transport between Chattogram port and the Kamalapur Inland Container Depot (ICD) in Dhaka has been severely disrupted over the past few months, mainly due to an acute shortage of locomotives at Bangladesh Railway, causing mounting difficulties for businesses.

Port officials said the problem has persisted for nearly a year but began to worsen in October, reaching a critical level in December.

Data from the Chittagong Port Authority (CPA) and Bangladesh Railway show that the railway operated an average of more than 112 container trains per month on the route from January to September, with the number peaking at around 140 trains in March and April.

In contrast, only 84 trains were operated in October, 95 in November and just 74 in December. This means that in December, only 37 trains ran from the Chittagong Goods Port Yard (CGPY) to Dhaka ICD, with an equal number operating in the reverse direction.

CPA Director (Operations) Md Omar Faruk said the port requires at least four pairs of container trains per day to transport around 200 twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs) of import containers and ensure smooth clearance of ICD-bound cargo.

By that estimation, more than 200 trains are needed each month to keep

operations running normally.

Officials at Kamalapur ICD said no container-carrying trains operated for nine days in December as the railway failed to provide locomotives. During the month, only one pair of trains operated on nine days, two pairs on 11 days and three pairs on just two days.

The disruption created a massive backlog at Chattogram port's ICD, which is designated for storing Dhaka-

**Officials at Kamalapur ICD said no container-carrying trains operated for nine days in December as the railway failed to provide locomotives**

bound import containers. The yard has a capacity of 887 TEUs, but as of yesterday, the number of stored containers had risen to 1,658 TEUs, nearly double its capacity.

This has put severe strain on port operations and raised concerns among importers.

A CPA official said the port has been forced to store ICD-bound containers in areas reserved for export containers arriving from Dhaka ICD, as well as in other yards located farther away.

Sorting and retrieving containers from these distant locations takes additional time during train loading and significantly increases operational costs, the official added. Business operators

say they are bearing the brunt of the disruption.

Khairul Alam Suzan, former vice-president of the Bangladesh Freight Forwarders Association (BAFFA), said ICD-bound containers unloaded from vessels four weeks ago were still waiting to be loaded onto trains due to the backlog.

Md Faruk Alam, general secretary of the Dhaka Customs Clearing and Forwarding Agents Association, said at least 1,300 TEUs of ICD-bound import containers have been stuck at the port for around four weeks.

As a result, importers are incurring substantial demurrage charges for containers overstaying at port yards, he said.

Md Sabuktageen, general manager (Eastern Region) of Bangladesh Railway, said freight train operations had resumed in full swing from last week, with three to four pairs of container trains being operated daily over the past few days.

He said locomotives were diverted to operate additional passenger trains in December due to heavy travel pressure, making it difficult to allocate engines for freight services.

The backlog is expected to be cleared within the next 10 days if operations continue at the current pace, he added.

The Eastern Zone currently has 131 locomotives, although more than 20 are undergoing repairs, according to the railway official.

## Bangladesh needs an economic nerve centre

MANWAR HOSSAIN

I have long believed Bangladesh has realised only a fraction of its potential. After more than three decades working across industries and engaging with government processes, one conclusion is hard to escape: fragmented governance, siloed decision-making and weak coordination among institutions are holding us back.

In 1961, South Korea created the Economic Planning Board to bring planning, budgeting, industrialisation and economic analysis under one command – the President's office. That same year, Singapore set up the Economic Development Board to align investors, infrastructure, skills and trade around a single industrial vision. These were not exercises in expanding bureaucracy. They were coordination authorities, economic nerve centres, that helped resource-constrained nations move with clarity and discipline.

Bangladesh does not need to copy these models. But it must learn from what worked.

Today, our economy is steered by powerful bodies: the National Board of Revenue, the Bangladesh Bank, Bida, the Securities and Exchange Commission, multiple ministries and scores of regulators, each with its own mandate and priorities. They rarely operate as one system with one shared vision. As a result, tax, investment, monetary, trade and industrial decisions are often taken in isolation and then collide in the real economy.

The costs are not theoretical. Take taxation in construction materials. The NBR may hesitate to withdraw VAT and taxes on cement used for brick making to protect short-term revenue targets. Yet lower taxes could make cement bricks competitive against environmentally harmful burnt bricks, improving public health and environmental outcomes.

What appears to be a revenue decision is also an industrial, environmental and health policy choice.

Economic policy is inherently interconnected. Construction alone illustrates this clearly. It links roughly 3,000 industries, from steel to microfinance. A narrow decision on steel taxes should not be judged only by immediate revenue effects. Lower input taxes

can raise activity across the entire ecosystem, creating jobs and downstream tax collections that may outweigh the initial loss.

Many countries have used real estate investment-friendly frameworks to generate powerful multiplier effects. Bangladesh should assess it.

If we are serious about reaching developed economy status by 2041, we need a permanent platform where these interconnections are understood and acted upon together. What the country needs is a National Financial Strategy Cell, placed directly under the Prime Minister's Office, to function as an economic nerve centre.

This should not become another administrative layer. It must be a lean, data-driven coordination mechanism that aligns fiscal, monetary, trade, investment and industrial policy so that decisions reinforce each other. Its role should be to stress test major proposals for cross-sector impact, flag contradictions early and present integrated options at the highest level.

Such a body should be empowered to convene regulators and relevant ministries, with credible private sector participation. The aim is not to replace existing institutions but to connect them. Private sector input matters because policy frictions often surface first on factory floors, at ports, in banks and in markets, long before they appear in official reports.

The payoff would be tangible. First, greater coherence, allowing revenue goals to be balanced with growth, jobs, competitiveness and environmental outcomes. Second, smarter incentives that support export upgrading and productivity without ad hoc distortions. Third, faster and more coordinated responses to crises, whether currency volatility, banking stress, supply disruptions or emerging global opportunities. We can no longer afford fragmented governance. When a minor fee change of just Tk 180 per truck can reportedly halt operations at Chattogram port for days, the deeper signal to investors is not the fee itself but the absence of predictability, consultation and coordination.

A tougher, faster and more complex world is approaching, but so are greater opportunities. Bangladesh has the potential and the entrepreneurial energy to seize them. What it needs now is one table where the right institutions sit together, one compass to align decisions and one mechanism that turns good intentions into coherent action.

The writer is the chairman of Anwar Group of Industries

## US-Venezuela oil deal angers China, pushes prices down

REUTERS, Houston/Beijing

Global oil prices fell on Wednesday and China denounced the US as a bully after President Donald Trump's administration said it had persuaded Venezuela to divert supplies from Beijing and import up to \$2 billion worth of embargoed crude.

The deal was in line with Trump's stated aim of controlling the South American Opec member's vast oil reserves after deposing its leader Nicolas Maduro, whom it had long cast as a drug-trafficking dictator in league with Washington's foes.

Maduro's Socialist Party allies remain in power in Venezuela, where interim President Delcy Rodriguez is treading a fine line between denouncing his "kidnapping" and kick-starting cooperation with the US under explicit threats from Trump.

**TRUMP: OIL MONEY WILL BE CONTROLLED BY ME'**

He said the US would refine and sell up to 50 million barrels of crude stuck in Venezuela under a US blockade as a first step in his plan to revive a sector long in decline despite sitting on the largest reserves in the world.

"This oil will be sold at its Market

Price, and that money will be controlled by me, as President of the United States of America, to ensure it is used to benefit the people of Venezuela and the United States," Trump posted on Tuesday.

Crude prices fell around 1.0 percent on world markets due to anticipated increased supplies.

The deal could initially require cargoes bound for Venezuela's top

buyer China to be rerouted as Caracas seeks to unload millions of barrels stranded in tankers and storage.

"The United States' brazen use of force against Venezuela and its demand for 'America First' when Venezuela disposes of its own oil resources are typical acts of bullying," Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning told a press conference.

"These actions seriously violate international law, gravely infringe upon Venezuela's sovereignty, and severely damage the rights of the Venezuelan people."

China, Russia and leftist allies of Venezuela have all denounced the US raid to capture Maduro at the weekend, which was Washington's biggest such intervention in Latin America since the 1989 invasion of

Panama to topple Manuel Noriega.

Washington's allies are also deeply uneasy at the extraordinary precedent of seizing a foreign head-of-state, with Trump making a slew of threats of more action - from Mexico to Greenland - to further US interests.

**DOZENS DIED DURING CAPTURE OF MADURO**

Some details are still sketchy on just how US Special Forces swooped into Caracas by helicopter under darkness on Saturday, smashing Maduro's security cordon and seizing him at the door of a safe room, with no loss of US lives.

Venezuela has not confirmed its total losses, though the army posted a list of 23 of its dead and ally Cuba said 32 members of its military and intelligence services died. The US estimates about 75 fatalities, the Washington Post reported.

Maduro, 63, who had ruled Venezuela since the 2013 death of his predecessor and mentor Hugo Chavez, pleaded not guilty on Monday to narcotics charges in a Manhattan court where he was shackled at the ankles and wore orange and beige prison garb.

Trump appears to be calculating that it is better for stability in

Venezuela to work with Maduro's senior allies for now. He is stressing revival of the oil sector with the help of US firms as the priority, not the freeing of political prisoners or a new vote for a democratic transition.

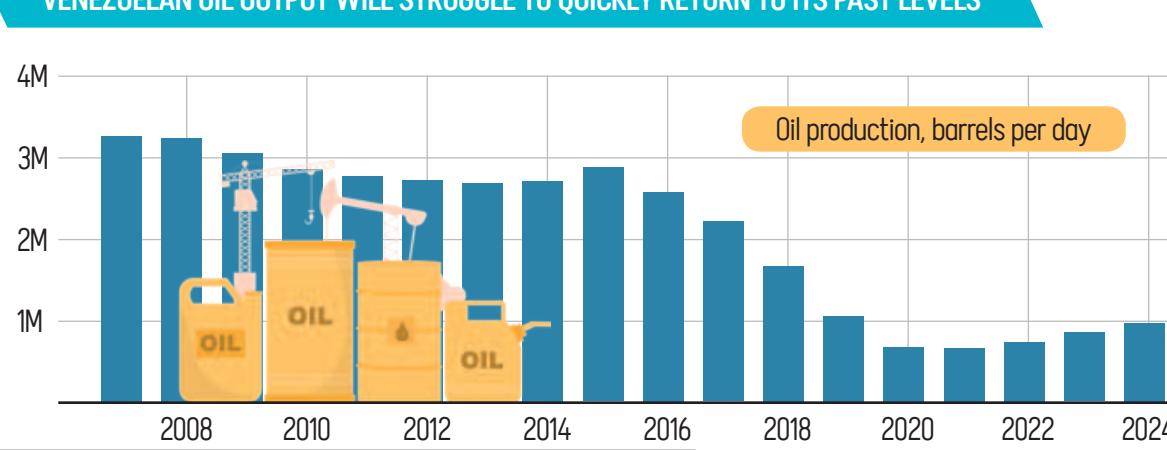
**VENEZUELAN OPPPOSITION KEPT WAITING**

Venezuela's main anti-Maduro figure Maria Corina Machado, who left in disguise to pick up the Nobel Peace Prize in October, wants to return home where she says the opposition would easily win a free vote.

But she is also taking care not to antagonise Trump, saying she would like to personally give him the Nobel prize which he had coveted and which she dedicated to him at the time. She says she is fully on board with his aspirations to make Venezuela a major ally of the US and the energy hub of the Americas.

Banned from running in a 2024 election, Machado's ally Edmundo Gonzalez won overwhelmingly, according to the opposition, the US and various election observers.

While working with Rodriguez and other top Venezuelan officials, the US has warned they must cooperate or risk sharing Maduro's fate.



"This Oil will be sold at its Market