

RMG exports to EU, non-traditional markets slip slightly

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Ready-made garment (RMG) exports to two major destinations – non-traditional markets and the European Union (EU) – saw a slight decline in 2025 compared with 2024, mainly due to lower demand for locally made garments.

Exports to non-traditional markets, which include all destinations except the EU, the US, Canada, and the UK, fell by 0.82 percent to \$6.25 billion in 2025, according to recently published data from the Export Promotion Bureau (EPB).

Exports to the EU also dropped slightly by 0.50 percent to \$19.30 billion compared with the previous year.

Meanwhile, shipments to other key markets grew last year. Exports to the US rose 4.68 percent to \$7.54 billion, while shipments to Canada and the UK increased by 7.23 percent and 1.49 percent, reaching \$1.33 billion and \$4.39 billion, respectively.

Overall, garment exports reached \$38.82 billion in 2025, up 0.89 percent from 2024, according to EPB data.

Local exporters expect a strong recovery in garment exports in 2026, as the global supply chain shows positive signs and Bangladesh prepares for its general election next month. They are hopeful that the business and investment environment will return to normal, and that international clothing brands and retailers will place full-volume orders with the factories.

Gold notches record high

REUTERS

Gold climbed on Wednesday to hit a record, while silver breached the \$90 mark for the first time, as softer-than-expected US inflation readings cemented bets for interest rate cuts amid ongoing geopolitical uncertainty.

Spot gold rose 1 percent to \$4,632.03 per ounce as of 0715 GMT, after hitting a record high of \$4,639.42 earlier in the session. US gold futures for February delivery rose 0.9 percent to \$4,639.50.

Spot silver jumped 3.6 percent to \$90.11 per ounce, having shot up nearly 27 percent so far this year.

POLICY & REGULATION

Govt to introduce safeguards against harmful pesticide use in haor wetlands

Local committees to regulate pesticide application

Bangla instructions on pesticide use to be made mandatory



PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

COVERAGE & TIMING

Seven haor districts included in the first phase

Haor region prioritised ahead of the Boro rice season

PESTICIDE USE TRENDS

Move follows excessive pesticide use nationwide

Pesticide consumption rose sharply between 2016 and 2021

IMPACT ON FISH & ENVIRONMENT

Haor fish catches have fallen steeply over the past decade

Fish output dropped by over 60,000 tonnes in ten years

Experts warn pesticide runoff is harming biodiversity and public health

Govt to curb pesticide use in seven haor districts

The initiative aims to protect fish and haor biodiversity

SUKANTA HALDER

The government plans to roll out a targeted initiative in seven haor districts to curb the harmful effects of pesticide use on fish, livestock and biodiversity, according to an internal document from the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock.

The districts – Sylhet, Sunamganj, Moulvibazar, Habiganj, Netrokona, Kishoreganj and Brahmanbaria – contain most of Bangladesh's haor wetlands and support large-scale Boro rice cultivation.

Confirming the plan, Fisheries and Livestock Adviser Farida Akhter said the haor region was prioritised because, with the Boro season approaching, the ecological risks in these areas were particularly acute.

She noted pesticide use nationwide far exceeds actual agricultural demand, making immediate countrywide enforcement difficult. "Other districts will be included gradually."

The haors supply a large share of the country's Boro rice, making the region critical to national food security.

"Excessive or uncontrolled use of pesticides during the Boro season can leave harmful chemical residues in the rice, which is risky for fish and human health in the future," said Borun Chandra Biswas, deputy director (fisheries resource conservation) at the Department of Fisheries.

Haors fill with water during the monsoon, allowing free movement of fish across vast wetlands. In the dry season, the land supports grazing livestock and rice cultivation. But Biswas said pesticide runoff has become a major concern.

"Around 25 percent of pesticides applied in fields are washed away by rainwater into

nearby open water bodies," he said, "with an estimated 15-20 percent remaining as residues."

The impact is especially significant in the haor ecosystem, which supports about 22 percent of the country's livestock and 24 percent of its ducks. Roughly 30 percent of total fish production in the seven haor-dominated districts comes from haor wetlands alone, Biswas said.

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The initiative comes amid a sustained decline in fish production in the haors, alongside growing concerns over species loss.

Data from the Bangladesh Fisheries Research Institute (BFRI) and ministry officials show that fish harvests in flooded haor areas fell from about 2.31 lakh tonnes in the fiscal year 2011-12 to roughly 1.28 lakh tonnes in 2023-24, a drop of more than 1.03 lakh tonnes in just over a decade.

The decline has coincided with rising pesticide consumption nationwide. According to the Bangladesh Crop Protection Association, pesticide use increased from 33,370 tonnes in 2016 to 39,540 tonnes in 2021.

Scientists say biodiversity loss in the wetlands is already severe. Saokat Ahmed, a senior scientific officer at the BFRI, said

around 133 fish species were once recorded in the haor region, but many are now at risk of extinction.

Critically endangered species include Bagha Air, Chenua and Bhangana Bata. Endangered species include Pabda, Chitol, Rita, Gozar and Koksha Boirali, while Chapila, Foli, Boal, Titputi, Guzi Air and Kuchia are considered vulnerable.

"Both natural and human-induced factors have contributed to the long-term decline in production," Ahamed said.

Adviser Akhter said pesticide use is also undermining soil health, with beneficial organisms such as frogs, earthworms, insects and microorganisms rapidly declining.

Chemicals from agricultural fields flow into haors and other water bodies, causing toxicity that kills fish and aquatic life, disrupts reproduction and degrades ecosystems, she added.

Under the new programme, the government plans to impose stricter controls on pesticide application through district- and upazila-level committees.

The ministry document says pesticide containers will be required to carry clear usage instructions in Bangla, while training and awareness campaigns will be conducted among farmers in haor-dominated areas.

Officials said regulations governing pesticide use already exist, including rules on residual periods – the mandatory waiting time before crops can be harvested safely.

In practice, however, farmers frequently ignore these guidelines, often harvesting and selling produce on the same day pesticides are applied, largely due to lack of awareness.

Bangladesh has 373 haors spread across 47 upazilas in seven districts, covering nearly 263,000 hectares, according to BFRI data.

Exporting Bangladeshi talent

PARVEZ MURSHED

I have worked for over a decade as a regional business head of a global bank based in Singapore. From my experience, if you walk the floors of any global bank's regional offices in Hong Kong or Singapore, you will find many staff from India, a few from Australia, but hardly any from Bangladesh.

India has a long tradition of exporting talent globally across industries, not just in banking. CEOs of some of the world's top companies, including Google, YouTube, Microsoft and Novartis, are all of Indian origin. Indra Nooyi led PepsiCo globally and transformed the company. In banking, Vikram Pandit, who moved to the US from India at 16, led Citigroup as CEO during the global financial crisis.

Former Pakistani prime minister Shaukat Aziz held a senior role with Citigroup in New York before returning home. The late Anshu Jain, a British-Indian, served as global co-CEO of Deutsche Bank.

Among the reasons for the limited global mobility of Bangladeshi talent, education is a primary factor. It would be an understatement to say our education system falls short compared with neighbouring countries. The written and spoken English of our graduates often lacks a strong command of vocabulary and grammar. This can undermine confidence when presenting key topics to international colleagues. Our business schools also do not emphasise essential skills such as storytelling or navigating corporate politics with skill.

Another factor is the limited culture of professionalism in workplaces. Many offices in Bangladesh operate informally, which can hinder professional development. Boundaries between personal and professional life are often blurred.

Simple professional behaviours such as punctuality, completing meetings on time, and starting discussions with a clear agenda are sometimes neglected.

Along with developing professionalism, we have to focus on building the essential skills required to succeed in a global workplace. One such skill is the ability to write professional emails that clearly articulate key points, while also responding to messages on time and acting on them promptly. Navigating different cultures across Asia can be challenging, but it can be achieved by understanding and respecting the diverse cultural practices in the region.

Some meritorious students from Bangladesh go overseas for higher education, which opens a window of opportunity to find employment in those countries after graduation. This window, however, is narrowing in many countries as emerging nativism limits employment and immigration opportunities for foreigners. For top talent working in multinational companies and the banking sector in Bangladesh, the best chance for overseas mobility is to go abroad, leveraging their global networks.

Bangladeshi leaders in these firms need to do much more than their counterparts in neighbouring countries to promote their best talent for overseas postings, whether on short-term or long-term assignments. This approach would allow Bangladesh to export its talent and broaden their exposure in the global marketplace. If these professionals choose to return after their overseas stint, they will bring back global best practices, enriching local workplaces through a reverse brain drain. Our country should be ready to welcome them.

The writer worked as a senior executive at global banks in Bangladesh and Singapore



China ends 2025 with record \$1.2tn trade surplus despite Trump tariffs

REUTERS, Beijing

China on Wednesday reported a record trade surplus of nearly \$1.2 trillion in 2025, led by booming exports to non-US markets as producers looked to build global scale to fend off sustained pressure from the Trump administration.

A push by policymakers for Chinese firms to diversify beyond the world's top consumer market by shifting focus to Southeast Asia, Africa and Latin America paid dividends, cushioning the economy against US tariffs and intensifying trade, technology and geopolitical frictions since President Donald Trump returned to the White House last year.

"China's economy remains extraordinarily competitive," said Fred Neumann, chief Asia economist at HSBC. "While this reflects gains in productivity and the rising technological sophistication of Chinese manufacturers, it is also due to weak domestic demand and attendant excess capacity."

Heading into 2026, the challenges for Beijing are aplenty, including

deflecting concerns from an increasing number of global capitals about China's trade practices and overcapacity, as well as their overreliance on key Chinese products.

One of the key questions facing policymakers is for how long the \$19 trillion economy can continue to counteract a property slump and sluggish domestic demand by shipping ever cheaper goods to other markets.

"Rising Chinese trade surpluses could raise tensions with trade partners, especially those reliant on manufacturing exports themselves," Neumann said.

The manufacturing juggernaut's full-year trade surplus came in at \$1.189 trillion – a figure on par with the GDP of a top-20 economy globally like Saudi Arabia – customs data showed on Wednesday, having broken the trillion-dollar ceiling for the first time in November.

"With more diversified trading partners, (China's) ability to withstand risks has been significantly enhanced," Wang Jun, a vice minister at China's customs administration, said at a press briefing following the data release.

Outbound shipments from the

world's second-biggest economy grew 6.6 percent in value terms year-on-year in December, compared with a 5.9 percent increase in November. Economists polled by Reuters had expected a 3.0 percent increase.

Imports were up 5.7 percent, after

a 1.9 percent bump the month earlier and also beat a forecast for a 0.9 percent uptick.

"Strong export growth helps to mitigate the weak domestic demand," said Zhiwei Zhang, chief economist at Pinpoint Asset Management.



Chinese container ship Cosco Shipping Aries is unloaded at a terminal in the Port of Hamburg in Germany. Rising Chinese trade surpluses could raise tensions with trade partners, said an economist.

PHOTO: REUTERS/FILE

"Combined with the booming stock market and stable US-China relations, the government is likely to keep the macro policy stance unchanged at least in Q1."

China's yuan, held steady following the upbeat data even as equity investors welcomed the forecast-beating numbers. The benchmark Shanghai Composite index and blue-chip CSI300 index both rose more than 1 percent in morning deals.

The Asian powerhouse economy's monthly trade surpluses exceeded \$100 billion seven times last year, partially underpinned by a weakened yuan, up from just once in 2024, underscoring that Trump's actions have barely dented China's broader trade with the wider world even if he has curbed US-bound shipments.

Exports to the US slumped 20 percent in dollar terms in 2025, while imports from the world's top economy were down 14.6 percent. Chinese factories managed to make inroads in other markets, with exports to Africa jumping 25.8 percent and those to the ASEAN bloc of Southeast Asian nations up 13.4 percent. EU-bound shipments grew 8.4 percent.

China's rare-earth exports in 2025 surged to their highest level since at least 2014, even as Beijing began curbing shipments of several medium to heavy elements from April – a move analysts saw as an effort to showcase its leverage over Washington while negotiators wrangled over soybean purchases, a potential Boeing aircraft deal and the fate of TikTok's US operations.

The world's top agricultural importer purchased a record volume of soybeans in 2025, buoyed by a sharp increase in shipments from South America, with Chinese buyers holding off from US crops for much of the year as trade tensions lingered.

Economists expect China to continue gaining global market share this year, helped by Chinese firms setting up overseas production hubs that provide lower-tariff access to the United States and the European Union, as well as by strong demand for lower-grade chips and other electronics.

Beijing, however, has shown signs of recognising it must moderate its industrial largesse if it is to sustain its success, and address the image problem outsized exports are causing.