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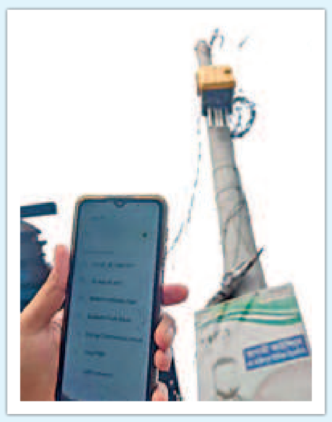


SOCIAL OBLIGATION FUND OVERVIEW

- Established in November 2011
- Accumulated over Tk **3,558** crore from inception to 2024
- **35** percent of the total fund remains idle
- Seven major projects were undertaken between 2018 and 2021 under the fund
- The fund remained dormant for nearly eight years
- Political bias led to a heavy concentration of projects in Gopalganj
- Rules were violated in one project by splitting tenders among bidders

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS IN THE WHITE PAPER

- Increase the mandatory contribution rate to 1.5 percent of revenue
- Reduce the ministry's control to ensure neutrality
- Integrate large projects into the ADP
- Require third-party impact studies for every project budget

Digital dream, paper reality

A Tk 3,500cr fund from mobile operators promised internet for remote areas, but 14 years later, most projects exist only on paper

MAHMUDUL HASAN

When the Social Obligation Fund (SOF) was created in 2011, it was meant to finance internet access in faraway districts and remote places the market would not reach.

Fourteen years and gathering more than Tk 3,500 crore later, a government-appointed white paper concluded that the fund has yielded few results.

And the culprits, according to the paper, are prolonged inaction, weak oversight, and politically influenced spending. These altogether have left large sections of the country still disconnected.

The white paper on the telecom sector, commissioned in April 2025 and published last week, reviewed project documents, financial records, and field inspections conducted by a telecom sector reform taskforce.

It found that the ambitious project, financed through mandatory contributions from licensed telecom operators, suffers from systemic governance failures, including delayed activation, lack of impact assessment, procurement violations and ineffective monitoring.

In multiple cases, infrastructure reported as "functional" was found to be unusable on the ground.

The failures documented in the report are linked to seven specific projects approved under the SOF.

Tk 450cr BTCL PROJECT: FUNCTIONAL IN PAPER ONLY

One of the seven projects reviewed by the white paper was a Tk 449.91 crore connectivity initiative implemented by the Bangladesh Telecommunication Company Ltd (BTCL) under the SOF.

The project, officially titled "Expansion of Telecommunication Facilities (Broadband Wi-Fi) for the Underprivileged Population of Remote Areas of Haor and Baor", was scheduled to run from April 2020 to June 2026.

According to project documents cited in the white paper, the initiative aimed to expand broadband access across 64 districts, covering 242 upazilas and 1,470 unions.

BTCL was tasked with installing 12,800 public Wi-Fi hotspots and laying 11,197 kilometres of optical fibre, primarily at government offices, union parishads, schools and health complexes in remote and underserved areas.

The white paper found that a significant number of these installations were either "non-functional" or "unreliable".

The shortcomings are evident in Dinajpur's Fazilpur union. Project documents say the site is "functional" and provides free high-speed connectivity.

During field inspections by the white paper taskforce, however, no Wi-Fi signal could be detected at the location. The same scenario unfolded at multiple other locations.

Local officials told inspectors that the connection is chronically unreliable, forcing them to purchase private internet services out of their own funds to carry out routine government work.

The taskforce cited the findings as evidence that project outputs reported on paper did not translate into usable services on the ground.

Summarising the pattern observed across multiple sites under the BTCL project, the white paper concluded, "The Dinajpur findings expose how weak maintenance capacity, absence of transparent performance auditing, and opportunistic behaviour among implementing partners render even subsidised internet unreachable to its intended beneficiaries."

A DECADE OF INACTION

The SOF was established in November 2011 under the Telecommunication Act (Amendment) 2010.

It requires all telecom operators, including mobile network operators, to contribute 1 percent of their audited gross annual revenue to a pooled fund dedicated to expanding connectivity in underserved regions such as coastal belts, river islands, and hill tracts.

Despite a steady inflow of contributions, the fund remained largely inactive for nearly eight years.

By 2024, Tk 3,558.98 crore had accumulated in the SOF account, yet the white paper states that around 35 percent of the total funds collected over 14 years remained unused due to regulatory bottlenecks and the absence of operational guidelines.

The SOF Management Committee did not approve its first projects until 2018. "The SOF is a story of delayed activation, underuse, and missed development opportunities," the report concludes.

POLITICAL PATRONAGE AND THE 'GOPALGANJ FACTOR'

One of the findings of the whitepaper is the blatant political bias in how these public funds were allocated. While the fund was intended for the most disadvantaged regions, the geographic distribution of projects tells a story of political patronage.

While Chattogram Division received the largest number of installations, consistent with its hilly and coastal geography, the Dhaka Division accounted for a disproportionately high share despite being the country's most urbanised region.

READ MORE ON B3

Post-larvae import of vannamei restricted

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The government has suspended all new and existing approvals for the import of post-larvae for vannamei shrimp farming and stressed the need to increase production of indigenous shrimp species such as bagda (black tiger) and galda (prawn).

The decision was made at a high-level meeting held at the Fisheries and Livestock Ministry, chaired by Fisheries Adviser Farida Akhter on January 7.

The meeting was convened to review the environmental, social, and economic impacts of vannamei shrimp farming in Bangladesh, according to a statement from the ministry yesterday.

Vannamei shrimp is an import-dependent species, and importing its post-larvae poses risks of disease transmission, environmental pollution, and adverse impacts on indigenous species, including bagda and galda.

Experts at the meeting added that the unrestricted expansion of vannamei shrimp farming would be harmful. The discussion emphasised that vannamei shrimp farming should be limited to controlled, intensive, and environmentally sustainable methods.

Directions were given to closely monitor the activities of already approved vannamei farmers and to conduct on-site evaluations to ensure proper compliance with farming conditions.

It was decided that until the completion of this evaluation, all new and existing approvals for the import of vannamei shrimp post-larvae will remain suspended.

The meeting further resolved that necessary research would be conducted to assess the environmental, social, and economic impacts of vannamei shrimp farming. Subsequent policy and administrative decisions will be made based on the findings of this research.

According to data from the Department of Fisheries, the annual demand for post-larvae in Bangladesh is approximately 75 crore. In the 2024-25 fiscal year, import permission was granted for 5 crore post-larvae, of which around 70 percent were imported.

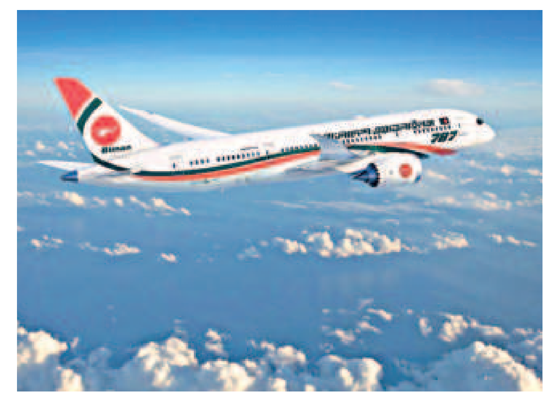
Govt to guarantee Biman's purchase of 14 Boeing aircraft

RASHIDUL HASAN

The government will provide a sovereign guarantee to Biman Bangladesh Airlines to buy 14 aircraft from US planemaker Boeing, as the two sides are likely to sign a deal within this month, sources at the national flag carrier said.

The first aircraft from Boeing for Biman is scheduled for delivery in November 2031, with the remaining aircraft expected to arrive by October 2035, Boshra Islam, general manager of Biman, told The Daily Star yesterday.

A sovereign guarantee is a commitment by the state to cover the debt or financial obligations of another entity if it defaults, reducing risk for lenders and improving access to financing for large or strategic investments.



"The government will give a sovereign guarantee to Biman to get the loan for buying aircraft from Boeing," Boshra said.

Asked about financing, she said Biman will issue a request for proposal to get the loan. "We will get the loan from those organisations that will offer the lowest interest rate," she added.

Biman has posted profits for the fifth year in a row. The state-owned carrier recorded a net profit of Tk 785 crore in the fiscal year 2024–25, a rise of 178 percent from the previous year.

At its annual general meeting on December 30 last year, Biman decided in principle to purchase 14 aircraft from Boeing to expand its fleet and modernise operations. The meeting was chaired by Aviation Adviser Sk Bashir Uddin, who is also the chairman of the national carrier.

Biman currently operates a fleet of 19 aircraft, 14 of which are Boeing-made. Under the new plan, the carrier will buy eight Boeing 787-10 Dreamliners, two Boeing 787-9 Dreamliners and four Boeing 737-8 MAX aircraft.

The interim government earlier pledged to buy 25 aircraft from Boeing as part of efforts to reduce the trade deficit with the United States. Following further evaluation, Biman finalised its decision.

The decision ruled out a competing proposal from Airbus to sell aircraft to Biman.

Under the previous Awami League government, a policy decision was announced to buy 10 Airbus aircraft, Boeing's European challenger. After the fall of Sheikh Hasina's government in the 2024 mass uprising, and amid pressure related to US reciprocal tariffs, the interim government shifted in favour of Boeing.

Board members said the move reflects the need to expand aviation capacity, strengthen international connectivity and meet future passenger and cargo demand.

The final contract with Boeing is likely to be signed within this month, followed by phased delivery of the aircraft, the sources said.

READ MORE ON B3

Ahsan Habib

Star reporter Ahsan wins BSEC Journalism Awards

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Ahsan Habib, senior staff correspondent of The Daily Star, along with seven other journalists, received the BSEC Journalism Excellence Awards 2025, presented by the Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission today.

Habib was awarded first prize in the print media category for his report titled "Beacon Pharma tricked general shareholders."

READ MORE ON B2

Depositors bear the brunt of loan scams

MD MEHEDI HASAN

Careful where you put your money, hoping for steady returns. Let alone interest, depending on the institution, you might even face difficulties in getting the original money back. Even banks that appear financially healthy can fail to deliver promises.

What should be a routine financial transaction has become a source of anxiety for Bangladeshis. The country has long witnessed financial fraud through Ponzi schemes and multi-level marketing companies such as Destiny and Jubok, which had no regulatory oversight.

ANALYSIS

However, banks and non-bank financial institutions (NBFIs) do have a regulator and are required to follow rules and regulations set by that authority – the Bangladesh Bank (BB).

The regulator supervises 61 banks and 35 NBFIs. Any institution seeking to accept deposits or extend loans must obtain a licence from the central bank.

Established in 1971, the BB was tasked with fostering financial stability, promoting transparent governance, and supporting sustainable economic growth.

Yet the recurring difficulties faced by depositors,

READ MORE ON B3

Garment exporters see brighter outlook as election nears

REFAYET ULLAH MIRDHA

American buyers are tapping the shoulder of Bangladeshi apparel makers. While exchanging new year greetings, Canadian buyers are also asking them how things are going. Local manufacturers say they are receiving phone calls and emails from buyers in Europe as well.

With less than a month to go before the national elections scheduled for February 12, local garment exporters say big business may be around the corner, as the polls are expected to calm frayed political nerves and improve overall law and order.

"Of course, the election is a major factor in restoring buyers' confidence, as political stability is expected after the polls," said Mostofa Q Sobhan Rubel, chairman of Dragon Group.

Rubel said his company is seeing a rise in inquiries, particularly from US and Canadian buyers for sweater items.

He said orders are increasingly shifting from China to Bangladesh after US reciprocal tariffs on Chinese goods climbed to nearly 50 percent.

Meanwhile, global conditions are also showing signs of improvement as inflation eases and supply chains gradually normalise. Rubel said he expects his exports to grow by about 30 percent this year, up from $20 million in 2025.

Exporters say prolonged political uncertainty, labour unrest in industrial zones months after the uprising and lingering aftershocks pushed many international buyers into a wait-and-see stance, delaying or trimming orders. With the election now in sight, those deferred orders are slowly resurfacing.

That tentative return of buyer interest comes after a subdued year for the local apparel sector.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Western buyers ramp up RMG orders ahead of Feb 12 polls
- Improved political stability expected to increase shipments
- Garment exports grew 0.88% in 2025 to $38.82b
- US reciprocal tariffs on Bangladeshi items set at 20%
- Global supply chains also stabilising gradually

Garment workers make their way to work amid foggy weather. The picture was taken recently at Ulail Bus Stop on Dhaka-Aricha Highway in the Bank Town area of Savar. PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

In the recently concluded 2025, the country's garment exports rose by just 0.88 percent to $38.82 billion, from $38.48 billion a year earlier, according to the Export Promotion Bureau (EPB). The slight increase reflects the combined impact of domestic disruptions and weak global demand.

The improving outlook is also being shaped by easing global pressures.

READ MORE ON B3

NRBC Bank deposit accounts cross 20 lakh mark

STAR BUSINESS DESK

NRBC Bank PLC has crossed a major milestone, with the number of its deposit accounts surpassing 2 million.

Over the past year, the number of deposit accounts rose by more than four lakh, accompanied by a notable increase in deposit volumes.

The bank marked the achievement at a recent event, where Md Touhidul Alam Khan, managing director and CEO of NRBC Bank PLC, attended as the chief guest, according to a press release.

Speaking at the event, Khan said the bank has earned customers' trust by meeting the financial needs of people from all walks of life across the country. He added that customers are increasingly choosing NRBC Bank for the safekeeping of their hard-earned money.

He emphasised that fast, simple and service-oriented banking lies at the core of this trust. Khan also expressed gratitude to customers, regulators, sponsors, shareholders, and the bank's officers and employees for their collective contribution to achieving the milestone.

According to information shared at the programme, the total number of deposit accounts stood at 2,036,274 as of the end of December last year.

At the end of December 2024, the number of savings accounts reached 1,633,141, marking a 24 percent year-on-year increase, with 403,133 new accounts opened during the period. Deposit accounts under the bank's shariah-based Al-Amin Islamic Banking grew by 36 percent during the year.

Md Touhidul Alam Khan, managing director and chief executive officer of NRBC Bank PLC, inaugurates a celebratory event marking the bank's achievement at its head office in Dhaka recently. PHOTO: NRBC BANK

Meanwhile, by the end of December 2025, NRBC Bank's total deposits rose by 16 percent to Tk 20,905 crore, up from Tk 18,041 crore a year earlier.

In addition to conventional banking, the bank offers shariah-based Islamic banking services through all its branches and sub-branches.

It currently operates 109 branches and 415 sub-branches across the country.

Mohammad Abdul Qaium Khan, deputy managing director, along with senior executives and branch and sub-branch managers from across the country, joined the event virtually.

Gold slips

REUTERS

Gold slipped on Thursday as investors booked profits after the yellow metal hit a record in the previous session, while an apparent softer tone from US President Donald Trump on the Federal Reserve chair and Iran also dampened safe-haven demand.

Spot gold was down 0.3 percent at $4,608.77 per ounce, as of 0652 GMT. Bullion hit a record $4,642.72 on Wednesday.

US gold futures for February delivery fell 0.5 percent to $4,613.0.

"Today, we're seeing that gold is down a bit after (Trump) said maybe we're not going to intervene in Iran, staving off safe-haven demand, but the larger story (of the metal's rise) is not going away," said Ilya Spivak, head of global macro at Tastylive.

With Iran's leadership trying to quell the worst domestic unrest since the 1979 revolution, Tehran threatened US military bases in the region, in an attempt to deter Trump's repeated threats of military intervention.

At the White House, however, Trump suggested he was adopting a wait-and-see posture toward the crisis.

Meanwhile, the president said on Wednesday that he has no plans to fire Fed Chair Jerome Powell, despite the Justice Department criminal investigation, but added it was "too early" to say what he would ultimately do.

Pubali Bank organises business conference

Monzurur Rahman, chairman of Pubali Bank PLC, inaugurates the bank's "1st Business Conference 2026" for regional and corporate branch managers at the bank's head office in Motijheel, Dhaka yesterday. PHOTO: PUBALI BANK

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Pubali Bank PLC yesterday organised its "1st Business Conference 2026" for regional and corporate branch managers at the bank's head office in Motijheel, Dhaka.

Monzurur Rahman, chairman of Pubali Bank PLC, inaugurated the conference as the chief guest, according to a press release.

In his speech, Rahman instructed bank officials to conduct banking activities in the current situation by strictly following the rules and regulations of Bangladesh Bank and other regulatory bodies. He also urged them to ensure that there is no deviation from banking policies.

Azizur Rahman, director of the bank, was present as a special guest.

Mohammad Ali, managing director and CEO of the bank, presided over the conference. In his address, Ali emphasised the need for the banking sector to accelerate economic activities amid the current global economic situation.

Md Amanullah Aman, chief executive officer of Famous Specialised Hospital Limited, and Md Abdullah Al Mamun, deputy managing director of Al-Arafah Islami Bank PLC, pose for a photograph after signing the memorandum of understanding at the bank's head office in Dhaka on Wednesday. PHOTO: AL-ARAFAH ISLAMI BANK

Jamuna Bank holds annual business conference

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Jamuna Bank PLC recently held its "Annual Business Conference 2026" at a hotel in Dhaka.

Md Belal Hossain, chairman of Jamuna Bank PLC, inaugurated the conference as the chief guest, according to a press release.

The bank awarded top-performing branches, sub-branches and divisions with the "Chairman's Award-2025", along with certificates for outstanding overall business growth.

Nur Mohammed, chairman of the bank's Executive Committee and Jamuna Bank Foundation; Kanutosh Majumder and Md Ismail Hossain Siraji, directors; and M Murshidul Huq Khan, an independent director, attended the programme.

Mirza Elias Uddin Ahmed, managing director and chief executive officer of the bank, presided over the event.

The conference reinforced Jamuna Bank's commitment to innovation, excellence and sustainable progress, cementing its status as a leading financial institution, the release added.

Md Belal Hossain, chairman of Jamuna Bank PLC, inaugurates the bank's "Annual Business Conference 2026" at a hotel in Dhaka recently. PHOTO: JAMUNA BANK

Al-Arafah Islami Bank signs MoU with Famous Specialised Hospital

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Al-Arafah Islami Bank PLC has signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Famous Specialised Hospital and Famous Specialised Hospital & Trauma Center.

Md Abdullah Al Mamun, deputy managing director of Al-Arafah Islami Bank PLC, and Md Amanullah Aman, chief executive officer of Famous Specialised Hospital Limited, signed the MoU at the bank's head office in Dhaka on Wednesday, according to a press release.

Under the MoU, the use of the bank's modern network will enhance the efficiency of the hospital's bill collection and financial management.

Besides, all officers, employees and cardholders of Al-Arafah Islami Bank PLC will enjoy benefits and discounts at the hospital.

The agreement will further expand the use of modern and innovative banking technology and open up new horizons for safe, reliable and effective financial management for corporate customers in the healthcare sector.

Md Amdadul Haque and Bacchu Sheikh, senior assistant vice-presidents; Abu Kawser, assistant vice-president; Nazmul Hossain, senior principal officer; Ashfaqur Rahman, principal officer; Md Yunus, managing director of Famous Specialised Hospital & Trauma Center; and Farhana Sharmin Jeba, executive director, along with other senior officials from both institutions, were also present.

Southeast Bank donates to NSTU for agri research

Prof Mohammad Ismail, vice-chancellor of Noakhali Science and Technology University, receives a cheque for financial assistance from MA Kashem, chairman of Southeast Bank PLC, at a hotel in Dhaka yesterday. PHOTO: SOUTHEAST BANK

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Southeast Bank PLC yesterday provided financial assistance to Noakhali Science and Technology University (NSTU) to support agricultural research activities under its special corporate social responsibility (CSR) fund.

MA Kashem, chairman of Southeast Bank PLC, handed over the cheque for financial assistance to Prof Mohammad Ismail, vice-chancellor of Noakhali Science and Technology University, at an event held at a hotel in Dhaka, according to a press release.

The bank said the aid reflects its ongoing commitment to promoting agricultural research and contributing to national agricultural development as part of its CSR initiatives. Senior officials from both organisations were also present at the event.

Star reporter

FROM PAGE B1

Jalil Munna Raihan, staff correspondent of Daily Ittefaq, also received an award in the category.

BSEC Chairman Khondoker Rashed Maqsood presented the awards as the chief guest at a ceremony held at the regulatory body's office in the capital, while commissioners Md Mohsin Chowdhury, Md Ali Akbar, Farzana Lalarukh, and Md Saifuddin were present as special guests. In the television media category, Tahidul Islam Rana, senior reporter of Independent Television, won the award.

In the same category, Alamgir Hossain, senior reporter of Jamuna Television, and Md Ataur Rahman, former staff reporter of Ekhon TV, received special awards.

In the online category, SM Nuruzzaman Tanim, senior reporter of Risingbd.com, was the winner, while Sayeed Shipon, senior staff reporter at Jago News, and SMA Kalam, senior reporter of Banglanews24.com, received special awards.

Anwar Ibrahim, a journalist from Samakal, declined to accept the special award in the print media category, stating that he believes the share market has not undergone proper reform in the last one and a half years.

However, at the end of the award-giving ceremony, the BSEC chairman, in his speech, highlighted the reform activities undertaken by the commission during his tenure, including several rule changes as well as the launch of investigations and punitive measures against stock market manipulators.

Call grows for single regulator for LPG sector

Operators juggle 26 licences, causing delays and costs

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Industry leaders, energy experts, and policymakers have called for a single, centralised regulatory authority to manage Bangladesh's fast-growing liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) sector.

With LPG consumption expected to more than double by 2030, stakeholders say a unified regulator is crucial to improve efficiency, ensure safety, and support sustainable growth for a sector serving over 1.5 crore households.

"Without a single, centralised regulator, the LPG sector's rapid growth will not be sustainable, and Bangladesh's energy security will remain at risk," said M Tamim, vice-chancellor of Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB), while presenting the keynote at a roundtable on "Regulatory challenges in the LPG market."

The event was organised by the LPG Operators Association of Bangladesh in cooperation with Energy and Power Magazine at the CIRDAP auditorium in Dhaka yesterday.

Tamim pointed out that LPG operators must obtain up to 26 separate licences and approvals from multiple entities, including the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC), Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation, the Department of Environment, Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution, Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority, and the Department of Explosives.

"This fragmented system causes overlapping inspections, unnecessary delays, and high compliance costs — over Tk 1.5 crore per year for some companies," he said, adding that such challenges discourage new entrants and put strain on smaller operators.

He proposed consolidating all LPG-related regulatory functions under a single body, possibly under the BERC.

Licences could last five to 10 years with annual inspections, and the approval process should be fully digital to streamline operations, improve safety monitoring, and clarify accountability.

Jalal Ahmed, chairman of BERC, stressed the importance of urgent regulatory reforms and better coordination to tackle ongoing sector challenges, including supply disruptions.

LPG imports fell by 163,000 tonnes in October–December 2025 compared to the previous year, he said, citing international supply issues and a lack of reliable data as key concerns.

"Data gaps remain a serious problem. We now collect information directly from the NBR to ensure accuracy," Ahmed said.

"This crisis is a learning moment. We must act quickly to avoid future disruptions," he added, reaffirming BERC's commitment to efficiency, monitoring, and public service.

Mohammad Amirul Haque, president of the LPG Operators Association, urged the government to establish a single, effective regulatory authority and allocate dedicated land for LPG infrastructure development.

Criticising delays caused by multiple regulatory bodies, he said, "We need clarity. One regulator must be assigned to this industry — not five. Otherwise, investment will stall."

Depositors

FROM PAGE B1

including long waits, crowded branches and fragmented repayments, raise questions about the effectiveness of regulatory enforcement.

Following widespread irregularities and loan scams under the previous government, the interim administration implemented a merger initiative to consolidate five shariah-based banks. The lenders are – First Security Islami Bank, Social Islami Bank, Union Bank, Global Islami Bank, and EXIM Bank.

The resulting institution, Sammilito Islami Bank PLC, received Tk 20,000 crore in paid-up capital from the government.

Under the merger plan, depositors of the affected banks began receiving repayments in phases from the start of the new year. However, depositors were never supposed to receive their hard-earned money in such fragmented instalments.

Depositors chose these banks believing they were financially sound, only to discover through forensic audits that the institutions were in poor condition.

This raises the question: who bears responsibility for the deception suffered by depositors?

The finance adviser has said that actions will be taken against these auditors who portrayed these banks as being in good health despite their poor condition. But timelines and implementation of those actions remain unclear.

In light of losses incurred by the merging banks, the BB, on January 14, instructed the five lenders that deposit balances be recalculated based on their position as of December 28, 2025.

The regulator also announced that depositors will not receive any profit for 2024 and 2025.

BB Governor Ahsan H Mansur yesterday at a press briefing emphasised that the decision aligns with shariah principles, under which no profit is distributed in the event of losses.

Digital dream, paper reality

FROM PAGE B1

The white paper attributes part of this imbalance to what it terms the "Gopalganj factor".

Two upazilas in Gopalganj district – Sadar and Kotalipara – ranked among the 10 most targeted areas nationwide.

In Tungipara, inspectors found overlapping infrastructure, with multiple SOF-funded projects installed at the same locations, contrary to the fund's objective of expanding access to unserved areas.

The commission also documented attempts to rename SOF-funded "Smart Classrooms" after political figures, describing such efforts as attempts to politicise publicly financed welfare initiatives.

7 PROJECTS, LITTLE IMPACTS

Between 2018 and 2021, seven major SOF-funded projects were approved, with a combined cost exceeding Tk 2,000 crore. These included fibre-optic backbone expansion by BTCL, satellite-based connectivity through Bangladesh Satellite Company Ltd (BSCL), mobile broadband initiatives, and education digitisation programmes.

Across all seven projects, the commission found no formal assessment of outcomes. "None of the 7 projects reviewed involved an impact study. There was no stakeholder feedback recorded either," the white paper states.

The report detailed project-specific weaknesses.

BTCL's fibre-optic initiative aimed to lay more than 10,000 kilometres of cable, but without effective partnerships with local internet service providers, much of the backbone capacity remained underutilised.

BSCL's VSAT-based connectivity for remote islands was hindered by high operating costs and the absence of trained local technicians to maintain equipment.

An education digitisation project distributed laptops and interactive boards to 650 primary schools, including schools without electricity or trained teachers, while digital content was procured at inflated prices from politically connected vendors, according to the taskforce.

OVERSIGHT FAILURES, PROCUREMENT VIOLATIONS

The white paper identifies governance failures as a central cause of poor outcomes.

The SOF Management Committee, chaired by the post and telecom minister, operated with what the report calls an "exceptionalism" that allowed projects to bypass standard government scrutiny.

Such exceptionalism of SOF projects' governance is also a key reason for their vulnerability in terms of conception, implementation and impact framework, it noted.

Investigators also documented violations of Public Procurement Rules, weak auditing practices, and widespread non-compliance.

In one BSCL project, a major contract was split equally between two bidders, violating procurement rules that require awarding contracts to the lowest responsive bidder.

In several cases, project documents were prepared within seven working days at the request of the minister, leaving little scope for feasibility analysis or cost-benefit assessment.

Because SOF projects are excluded from the Annual Development Programme, they were not monitored by the Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division or audited by the audit directorate.

This structural exclusion, the taskforce argues, allowed mismanagement to persist unchecked.

The report also notes that while major telecom operators comply with SOF contribution requirements, there is widespread default among smaller internet service and international gateway operators.

As a result, the actual fund balance is significantly lower than it would be if all 3,000+ licensed entities were fully compliant.

PROPOSED REFORMS

As per the white paper, the SOF has been characterised by "delayed activation, underuse, and missed development opportunities".

While thousands of crores of taka have been spent, the digital divide remains a chasm for the villagers in Dinajpur and other remote regions who still wait for the connectivity they were promised over a decade ago.

To prevent further misuse, the white paper recommends a restructuring of the SOF framework.

Proposals include performance-based funding; mandatory political neutrality clauses prohibiting the use of funds for politically branded initiatives or partisan constituencies; compulsory impact studies greater inclusion of private sector instead of funnelling all funds to struggling state-owned entities like BTCL; third-party evaluations; allowing watchdogs to verify that the promised internet services are actually delivered; and greater participation by local stakeholders in both implementation and oversight.

Faiz Ahmad Taiyeb, special assistant to the chief adviser with executive authority over the post and telecommunication ministry, said the government is aligning the SOF framework with the white paper's recommendations.

A revised SOF management policy, previously drafted but withheld, will now be issued after incorporating the taskforce's guidance.

"We have instructed that all recommendations and guidelines given by the white paper committee be accommodated, and that a revised SOF policy be issued accordingly," Taiyeb told The Daily Star.

He added that new inspection mechanisms, including three-stage inspections and third-party physical verification, have already identified problems such as cable theft and battery damage linked to outdated equipment.

Garment exporters

FROM PAGE B1

Inflation in major economies has cooled, and supply chains are stabilising after years of disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war and ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, which had dampened apparel demand worldwide.

According to exporters, Bangladesh's position in global sourcing has strengthened further due to tariff differences in the US market.

The reciprocal tariff on Bangladeshi garments currently stands at 20 percent, lower than rates imposed on some competitors, including India and China, where duties have climbed close to 50 percent.

Even so, shipments to the US, Bangladesh's largest single country export destination, slowed during the peak months of September to November last year, when orders usually rise ahead of the Christmas season.

Exporters linked the slowdown to a front-loading of shipments earlier in the year.

Between January and April last year, before revised tariff rates took effect, the average duty on Bangladeshi garment exports to the US was around 16.5 percent.

Anticipating higher tariffs later, exporters rushed consignments during that period. Many US retailers then pared back imports in the second half of the year as inventories piled up.

Tariff uncertainty eased after negotiations with Washington. The reciprocal duty was scaled down to 20 percent, restoring a degree of predictability for buyers and suppliers.

Against this backdrop, apparel manufacturers are upbeat about the 2026 export outlook.

MA Jabbar, managing director of DBL Group, said the formation of an elected government would help rebuild confidence across the supply chain, from factory owners to global retailers and investors.

DBL exported \$506 million worth of garments in 2025 and is targeting about 10 percent growth in 2026, after exports slipped from \$520 million in 2024.

Industry leaders, however, also said that political stability alone will not guarantee a sustained rebound.

Humayun Rashid, chairman of Energypac Fashions Ltd, said persistent challenges in energy supply, port and logistics efficiency, banking sector health and international connectivity continue to weigh on competitiveness.

He added that concerns over Bangladesh's global image also remain an issue for some buyers.

Addressing ease of doing business is critical if the sector is to turn this short-term recovery into long-term growth, Rashid said.

Govt to guarantee

FROM PAGE B1

The board reviewed Boeing's proposal dated November 24, 2025, along with a revised draft agreement submitted on December 20, 2025, before granting policy-level approval on December 30.

Biman has faced a severe fleet shortage in recent years after failing to manage aircraft availability through leasing, disrupting existing routes and delaying the launch of new services.

Aviation analyst and former Biman board member Kazi Wahidul Alam said aircraft purchases usually require a down payment of about 10 percent of the total price, usually arranged through banks.

"Only after the down payment is made and the aircraft purchase agreement is signed does the order become officially confirmed," he said.

Recalling Biman's 2007 deal with Boeing, he said the signing process was complex. "Initially, the plan was to sign the agreement in Dhaka. Later, we were required to go to the US Department of Commerce to finalise it," he said.

Alam, however, said, "Relying solely on a single manufacturer undermines commercial competitiveness."

Airbus, Europe's largest aerospace company, has urged Biman to assess aircraft purchases based on commercial and technical merit rather than political considerations, amid reports that Bangladesh has agreed to buy Boeing aircraft as part of a trade arrangement with the United States aimed at easing additional tariffs.

Wouter van Wersch, executive vice-president for international at Airbus, told The Daily Star in December last year that Biman's aircraft decision should be based on offers, not politics.

"We want Biman to take the decision based on fact, based on commercial, technical and capacity-building value," he added.

In November last year, ambassadors and high commissioners from France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the European Union also urged the government to consider Airbus aircraft for Biman at a joint press conference in Dhaka.

India's rice exports to top buyer Iran stall

REUTERS, *Mumbai/New Delhi*

India's basmati rice exports to Iran have slowed to a near standstill amid the protests gripping the Gulf country, with suppliers wary of new deals due to the risk of non-payment and potential additional US tariffs, trade officials said.

US President Donald Trump said on Monday that any country trading with Iran would face a 25 percent tariff on its commerce with the US, a move exporters say has made Indian suppliers even more reluctant to sign new contracts with Iranian buyers.

"The proposed 25 percent levy under the Trump framework adds an additional challenge to the Indian basmati rice sector," said Akshay Gupta, head of bulk exports at KRBL Ltd, a leading rice exporter.

India is Iran's largest rice supplier, with the staple accounting for nearly two-thirds of all Iranian imports from the country.

Protests in the Gulf country and US tariff threat on it stall India's basmati rice exports amid payment risks

"We're worried about the payments for rice shipped in the last two months," said a New Delhi-based exporter, who declined to be named.

"In some cases, buyers report they did not receive the full quantity; in others, they have fled the country because of the ongoing protests," the exporter said.

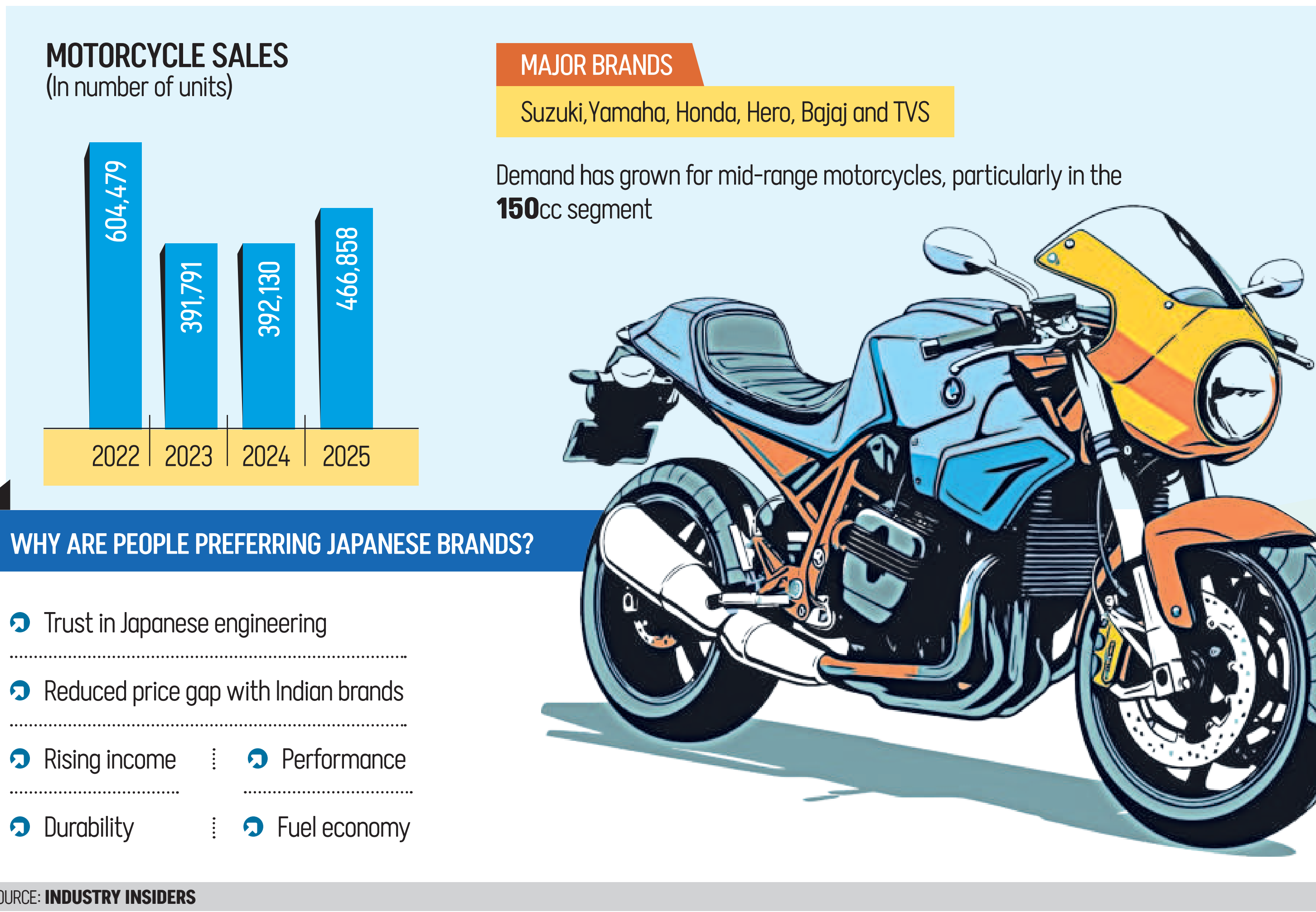
The current protests began last month in Tehran, with shopkeepers condemning the rial currency's free fall.

Unrest has spread nationwide amid deepening distress over economic privations arising from rocketing inflation driven by mismanagement and Western sanctions, and curbs on political and social freedoms.

Importers have conveyed their inability to honour existing commitments and remit payments to India, creating heightened uncertainty for exporters, Dev Garg, vice president of the Indian Rice Exporters Federation (IREF), said in a statement. India's Ministry of Commerce and Industry declined to comment.

Iran previously supplied foreign exchange to food importers at a subsidised rate, but it has now suspended that provision, effectively making imports much more expensive for buyers, said Vijay Setia, a top rice exporter.

Japanese brands take the lead as motorcycle market recovers



JAGARAN CHAKMA

Japanese motorcycle brands tightened their grip on Bangladesh's two-wheeler market in 2025, capturing the bulk of new demand as consumers increasingly favoured reliability, fuel efficiency and long-term value over lower upfront prices.

Suzuki, Yamaha and Honda together accounted for 58 percent of total motorcycle sales during the year, according to industry data compiled by two leading manufacturers, reinforcing a shift that has been taking shape since the post-pandemic period.

Industry executives say the dominance reflects sustained consumer trust in Japanese engineering, particularly as the price gap with Indian brands has narrowed.

The expansion of Japanese market share came alongside a broader recovery in the motorcycle industry.

After two consecutive years of contraction, annual sales rose to 466,858 units in 2025, up 19 percent from 392,130 units the previous year, according to the compiled data.

The rebound followed a sharp 35 percent decline in 2023, when economic uncertainty and political instability disrupted demand. Despite the recovery, the industry is still short of its all-time high of 604,479 units sold in 2022.

Within the revived market, Japanese brands were the primary beneficiaries.

Suzuki led overall sales with 93,838 units, securing a 20.1 percent share. Yamaha followed with 19.7 percent, while Honda captured 17.8 percent.

Indian brands Hero and Bajaj trailed closely, accounting for 18.1 percent and 17.6 percent of market share, respectively. Together, the five largest manufacturers accounted for more than 93 percent of total sales.

Industry insiders say the shift has been reinforced by changing usage patterns.

Demand has grown for mid-range motorcycles, particularly in the 150cc segment, as rising incomes and worsening urban congestion make performance, durability and fuel economy more important than entry-level affordability.

Japanese dominance was most pronounced in the second half of the year. Between July and December, total sales rose to 215,547 units from 189,853 a year earlier, with Japanese brands occupying the top three positions.

Yamaha led the period with a 22 percent share, followed by Suzuki and Honda, each with around 20 percent.

Hero posted a 36 percent sales increase to reach 38,198 units, gaining an 18 percent share.

Subrata Ranjan Das, executive director of ACI Motors, the official distributor of Yamaha motorcycles, said Japanese brands have benefited from a clear shift in buyer behaviour.

Japanese brands have benefited from a clear shift in buyer behaviour

Subrata Ranjan Das
ED, ACI Motors

He estimated overall market growth at 16-17 percent year-on-year.

"Though Yamaha's calendar year sales trail slightly, we've led the market over the past six months," Das said.

Das said performance, fuel efficiency and durability have become decisive factors for buyers, particularly as price differences with Indian models have narrowed.

"Japanese motorcycles offer better long-term value," he said, adding that 82 percent of Yamaha buyers are existing motorcycle users, and 55 percent upgraded from Indian brands.

Yamaha's strength in the 150cc segment has also supported its position, he said, driven by consistent demand and recent product launches.

However, Das flagged fuel quality as a growing concern, warning that substandard fuel has caused corrosion and mechanical damage in motorcycles.

He said the company and the Motorcycle Manufacturers Association had shared laboratory findings with authorities, calling for tighter regulation. "We've conducted multiple lab tests and shared results with energy officials."

Honda executives offered a similar assessment. Shah Muhammad Ashequr Rahman, chief marketing officer of Bangladesh Honda Private Limited, said improving macroeconomic stability had supported demand but stressed that brand trust and after-sales service were key to Honda's gains.

"A relatively stable exchange rate, better foreign currency reserves, easing inflationary pressures, and the rising purchasing power of the broader population have all contributed to this improvement," he added.

Against this backdrop, Honda expanded its service network and introduced new models to strengthen customer loyalty.

"We responded to evolving customer needs by introducing new models, expanding our after-sales service network, and deepening our relationship with customers," he said.

Meanwhile, TVS recorded a steep decline of 70 percent, selling just 3,590 units in the second half, compared to 11,947 in the same period last year. In total, its sales dropped 80 percent in 2025.

Biplob Kumar Roy, chief executive of TVS Auto Bangladesh, said the company's sales dropped to just over 10,000 units in 2025, from a typical annual volume of around 60,000.

Roy attributed the slump to the company's failure to introduce new or upgraded models, distancing the decline from broader market trends.

"It's not the market, it's us," he said.

Lower-income US consumers increasingly 'price sensitive': Fed

AFP, *Washington*

US consumers in lower income groups are becoming more sensitive to prices when making spending decisions, showing reluctance to fork out for non-essentials, the Federal Reserve said in a report on Wednesday.

While consumption saw a boost in recent weeks from the holiday shopping season, spending patterns continued to diverge among income groups, the Fed added in its "beige book" survey of economic conditions.

Some parts of the country reported that "spending was stronger among higher-income consumers," who were willing to splurge on luxury goods, travel and other experiences, the Fed said.

"Meanwhile, low to moderate income consumers were seen to be increasingly price sensitive and hesitant to spend on nonessential goods and services," the survey added.

The report underscores uneven conditions within the world's biggest economy -- despite resilient GDP growth figures -- where higher-income Americans are seeing wealth and salaries rising while those with lower incomes grapple with fewer gains and high costs.

Banking conditions were generally stable or improving, the central bank added, although there was some increased demand in credit cards, home equity loans and commercial lending.

Overall, the Fed noted that "outlooks for future activity were mildly optimistic with most expecting slight to modest growth in coming months."

The latest report comes around two weeks before the central bank is due to announce its next decision on interest rates.

Markets widely expect policymakers to keep rates unchanged for now, as officials assess the impact of recent back-to-back reductions.

The Fed balances between the need for rate cuts to boost the economy as the employment market cools, and the risk of persistent inflation as President Donald Trump's tariffs work their way through supply chains.

Employment was mostly unchanged recently while wages grew moderately, the Fed said Wednesday. But "cost pressures due to tariffs were a consistent theme across all districts" monitored by the central bank.

"Several contacts that initially absorbed tariff-related costs were beginning to pass them on to customers as pre-tariff inventories became depleted or as pressures to preserve margins grew more acute," the Fed said.

Even though firms expect price hikes to ease, they anticipate that costs will remain elevated in the near future.

Trump backs Venezuela staying in OPEC

REUTERS, *Washington*

President Donald Trump said on Wednesday that he believes it would be better for Venezuela to remain in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, or OPEC, but added he was unsure if that would be a better situation for the United States.

"Well, I think it's better for them if they do it," Trump said in a Reuters interview when asked if the administration supports Venezuela remaining in the oil cartel. "I don't know that it's better for us ... but they are a member of OPEC, and we haven't discussed that with them at all," Trump added.

Venezuela, a founding member of the oil cartel, sits atop some of the world's largest crude reserves but has seen output collapse in recent years amid economic turmoil and sanctions. Trump has sought to assert control over Venezuela's oil supply after the US ousted President Nicolás Maduro in an operation earlier this month.

Trump's administration has said it would need to control Venezuela's oil resources indefinitely as it seeks to rebuild the country's oil industry and exert pressure on the Caracas government.

Oil slides over 3%

REUTERS, *New Delhi*

Oil prices slid more than 3 percent on Thursday after US President Donald Trump said killings in Iran's crackdown on nationwide protests were stopping, tempering concern over military action against Iran and supply disruption.

Brent futures were down $2.21, or 3.32 percent, at $64.31 a barrel by 0727 GMT, while US West Texas Intermediate crude slipped $2.05, or 3.31 percent, to $59.97 a barrel.

Both benchmarks settled more than 1 percent higher on Wednesday but gave back most gains after Trump's remarks reduced fear of a potential US attack on Iran.

Trump on Wednesday afternoon said he had been told that killings of anti-government protesters in Iran were subsiding and he believed there was no plan for large-scale executions.

"Selling pressure prevailed on expectations that the US would not take military action against Iran," said Hiroyuki Kikukawa, chief strategist of Nissan Securities Investment, a unit of Nissan Securities.

Bearish factors also include larger-than-expected US crude inventories, he said.

"While geopolitical risks remain high and unforeseen events could disrupt the supply-demand balance, WTI is likely to trade in the $55-$65 range for the time being," Kikukawa said.

The United States is withdrawing some personnel from military bases in the Middle East, a US official said on Wednesday, after a senior Iranian official said Tehran had told neighbours it would hit American bases if Washington strikes.

Further weighing on prices, US crude and gasoline inventories rose more than analysts estimated last week, the Energy Information Administration said on Wednesday.

Crude stocks climbed by 3.4 million barrels to 422.4 million barrels in the week ended January 9, compared with analysts' expectations of a 1.7 million-barrel draw.

China wields a steadier blade over tech giants

REUTERS, *Hong Kong*

China's market watchdogs have a new target: online travel agent Trip.com. Following investigations into Alibaba and Meituan five years ago that shook investor faith in the country's tech sector, the State Administration for Market Regulation on Wednesday announcedit is probing the New York- and Hong Kong-listed firm led by Jane Sun for monopolistic behaviour, erasing some $8 billion, or 17 percent, from its market capitalisation.

Trip.com says it will co-operate with authorities, but it is a vulnerable target. The company's acquisitions over the past decade, including the purchase of a stake in peer Tongcheng Travel, have cemented its dominance. Analysts at Bank of Communications International estimated Trip.com had a 56 percent share of the country's online travel bookings in 2024, per local media.

Thanks to a post-pandemic boom in domestic travel, its top line, which also includes international sales, is forecast to jump 14 percent this year, to 71 billion yuan ($10.1 billion), according to estimates gathered by Visible Alpha. Impressively, its gross profit margin is expected to remain at 80 percent for the next five years, up from 72 percent a decade ago.

That level of pricing power has attracted the ire of both hotel and tourism groups plus other regulators, which are already scrutinising the sector amid intensifying competition between the market leader and rivals Alibaba, Meituan and JD.com. As recently as last month, for example, the Yunnan Provincial Tourism Homestay Industry Association called out Trip.com and peers for forcing mom-and-pop businesses to choose one online agency, as well as for raising commission rates and setting unfair conditions, among other complaints. In the second half of last year, provincial antitrust regulators summoned Trip.com at least four times, local media reported.

People look at the train arriving at the Liziba monorail station located in a residential building in Yuzhong district in Chongqing. China's domestic travel is forecast to jump 14 percent this year, to $10.1 billion. PHOTO: AFP/FILE

An antitrust fine of up to 10 percent of domestic sales looms. Analysts at Citi reckon that translates to a maximum 4.9 billion yuan, roughly $700 million, hit – or 23 percent of Trip.com's forecast 2026 net profit, per Visible Alpha estimates. The bigger risk will be whether officials will tolerate the company's outsized profits at a time when Beijing is trying to spur consumption in the $19 trillion economy. Trip.com's fortunes are also a sharp contrast to those of struggling hoteliers and state-owned airlines.

Investors can at least take comfort that, unlike with Alibaba, the crackdown on Trip.com does not appear to be driven by Sun or its founders falling out of grace with Beijing. In some ways, that makes China's antitrust regime more predictable.

China's State Administration for Market Regulation on January 14 said it has launched an investigation into online travel company Trip.com over alleged monopolistic practices. The company's New York shares closed down 17 percent to $62.78 on the day.

Trip.com said in a statement that it was "actively" co-operating with the investigation and would "fully implement regulatory requirements".