

star BUSINESS



External debt almost doubles in just over three years

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Bangladesh's external debt has nearly doubled in just over three years, driven by a surge in emergency budget financing in the post-Covid period and a sharp devaluation of the local currency that inflated the value of dollar-denominated obligations.

The country's total external debt jumped 92 percent to Tk 9.51 lakh crore by the end of September 2025, compared with June 2022 levels, according to a debt bulletin published Tuesday by the Ministry of Finance.

The sharp increase reflects Bangladesh's growing reliance on quick-disbursing budget support loans rather than traditional project financing, amid weak revenue collection and widening fiscal deficits.

Between fiscal years 2021-2022 (FY22) and 2024-2025 (FY25), Bangladesh received \$9.82 billion in budget support, with \$3.44 billion coming last fiscal year alone.

Budget support loans, which are disbursed immediately upon approval and come with policy conditions, rose 69 percent year-on-year in FY25, even as project loans fell more than 29 percent.



The shift reflects the government's need for funds that can be deployed immediately to cover budget operations amid weak revenue collection. Unlike project loans, which are disbursed gradually and tied to specific infrastructure works, budget support can be used directly for deficit financing.

The interim government has continued prioritising budget support over project loans, maintaining the pattern established by the previous administration.

Currency devaluation has compounded the debt burden. The local currency has weakened to around Tk 122 per dollar from Tk 85 several years ago, thanks to heightened imports in the post-Covid period and commodity price surge in global markets, among other factors.

The government's total debt rose 1 percent to Tk 21.49 lakh crore in the first quarter of the current fiscal year, pushing the debt-to-GDP ratio up roughly two percentage points to 38.61 percent.

Of the total debt stock, Tk 11.97 lakh crore is domestic borrowing, while the remainder consists of external obligations.

The growing debt load is straining government finances. Interest payments surged 27 percent year-on-year to Tk 31,629 crore during the July-September period in FY25.

Of this, domestic interest payments rose 19 percent, while interest on external borrowings rose 80 percent. Among domestic elements, payment for treasury securities rose by 21 percent and national savings certificates by 16 percent.

Power rate cut at state firms to save Tk 119cr a year

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The government will save around Tk 119 crore annually in electricity purchases thanks to a reduction in tariff rates by 10 to 21 paisa per kilowatt for three public-sector plants.

The revised tariff rates were approved at a meeting of the advisory committee on government purchases held on February 3. Among the three plants, the 450-megawatt Ashuganj Combined Cycle Power Plant (2012), approved under a 25-year contract, will have its tariff rate reduced by 21 paisa to Tk 5.76 per kilowatt for the remaining 15 years.

As a result, the Power Development Board's electricity purchase cost from this plant will decrease by Tk 19.25 crore annually, requiring payments of Tk 1,593 crore per year.

Meanwhile, the gas-based Siddhirganj 335-megawatt Combined Cycle Power Plant, which began production in 2019, will have its tariff rate reduced by 10 paisa to Tk 5.42 per kilowatt. This will save Tk 63 crore annually for the next 16 years.

In addition, the 412-megawatt Haripur Power Plant of the Electricity Generation Company, established in 2014 with financial assistance from the Japan International Cooperation Agency, will have its tariff rate reduced by 21 paisa to Tk 4.75 per kilowatt.

This will save Tk 37 crore annually for the remaining 14 years of its contract period.

Govt's net bank borrowing jumps nearly fivefold

Tk 48,819cr collected in seven months, nearly half of full-year target, as revenue growth falls short

SOHEL PARVEZ

The interim government's net borrowing from the banking system rose almost fivefold in the first seven months of the current fiscal year 2025-26, as spending raced ahead of sluggish revenue collection.

The government borrowed Tk 48,819 crore from banks as of January 25, compared with Tk 10,558 crore by January 23 last year, according to Bangladesh Bank (BB) provisional data.

The amount already accounts for nearly half of the full year's borrowing target of Tk 104,000 crore.

The sharp rise reflects a widening gap between expenditure and income. Government spending has climbed steadily, while revenue collection has failed to keep pace.

The National Board of Revenue posted a 14 percent year-on-year growth in collection in the first six months of FY26, mobilising Tk 185,229 crore. Even so, receipts fell short of the target by about Tk 46,000 crore.

In the same period last year, revenue slipped by 1 percent amid unrest following the political changeover in August 2024.

"This is not a sustainable situation," said Fahmida Khatun, executive director of private think-tank the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD).

She said weak domestic resource mobilisation pushes debt levels higher and leaves little room to manage day-to-day spending. "The revenue collection remains so low that it is difficult to manage regular expenditure."

According to the economist, the country's persistently low tax-to-GDP ratio has made the government increasingly reliant on bank borrowing, driving up debt and interest payments.

In FY25, interest payments reached a

BORROWING

Jul-Jul borrowing reached nearly half of the full-year target

Higher borrowing risks slowing recovery and job creation

GOVT'S NET BORROWING FROM BANKS

In crore taka
*Jul 1, 2024 to Jan 23, 2025 **Jul 1, 2025 to Jan 25, 2026

48,819

10,558

FY25* FY26**

SOURCE: BB



REVENUE STRESS

- Expenditure growth continues to outpace revenue
- NBR collections in Jul-Dec fell Tk 46,000cr short
- Low tax-to-GDP ratio remains a structural weakness

BUDGET PRESSURE

Debt servicing continues to squeeze development spending

Interest payments hit a record Tk 132,460cr in FY25

Interest costs account for 13% of the FY26 budget

record Tk 132,460 crore, almost one-fifth of total budget spending, according to the finance ministry's debt bulletin.

For the current year, interest costs stand at Tk 122,000 crore, accounting for 13 percent of the budget.

As debt servicing takes up a larger share of public funds, allocations for education, health and infrastructure are squeezed, undermining long-term growth prospects.

Fahmida said that unless tax collection grows fast, heavier government borrowing

from banks will also tighten credit for the private sector.

Ashikur Rahman, principal economist at the Policy Research Institute (PRI), warned that a risky cycle is beginning to take hold.

Higher borrowing, he said, feeds directly into a growing interest burden within the fiscal framework.

"As debt servicing absorbs a larger share of public expenditure, fiscal space for productivity-enhancing investments, particularly in human capital, health,

education, and critical infrastructure, shrinks," he explained.

Over time, this trade-off weakens the state's ability to address structural development constraints and undermines the quality of growth itself, said Rahman.

Rising government demand for credit also crowds out private firms, pushing up borrowing costs and discouraging investment.

"This is particularly concerning at a time when economic recovery and employment generation depend critically on a revival of private sector confidence and investment momentum," he added.

The persistence of high borrowing also points to deeper weaknesses on the revenue side. Despite some gains, collections remain far below what is needed to finance public spending in a sustainable way.

"This points to longstanding deficiencies in tax policy design, tax administration, and compliance. Without a durable improvement in domestic resource mobilisation, borrowing risks becoming a default adjustment mechanism rather than a temporary counter-cyclical tool," he said.

Breaking the cycle, Rahman said, will require prudent debt management alongside credible revenue reforms and a clear medium-term fiscal strategy that shifts spending towards growth-enhancing priorities rather than debt servicing.

More pressure is expected in the months ahead. The rollout of a new pay scale for government employees will require an additional Tk 106,000 crore, around one-fifth of total operating expenditure for the year.

CPD's Fahmida suggested the increases should be phased in.

Otherwise, she said, maintaining fiscal balance will become one of the toughest challenges for the next government.

Global law firm hired for S Alam arbitration

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Bangladesh's interim government has appointed international law firm White & Case LLP to defend the country in an arbitration case filed by S Alam Group.

White & Case LLP is a leading global law firm formed in the United States. While maintaining a strong US foundation and headquarters, it operates as a worldwide partnership with 46 offices across 31 countries.

The decision, approved by the

government's purchase committee on Tuesday, comes as the government prepares for a legal challenge over its crackdown on assets allegedly amassed through corruption under the Awami League regime.

Finance Adviser Salehuddin Ahmed confirmed the appointment, signalling the government's intent to respond to the arbitration notice.

The legal battle involves "a lot of money" and the case is "very complicated," he told reporters after

the committee meeting in Dhaka, referring to the complaint filed with the World Bank's International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID).

The government has agreed to pay White & Case an hourly rate of \$1,250 (Tk 152,691) to handle the proceedings.

The case was filed late last year by Mohammed Saiful Alam, founder of S Alam Group, and his family members.

The claimants, now Singaporean nationals, allege the interim

government has violated a 2004 bilateral investment treaty between Bangladesh and Singapore by freezing their assets and conducting what they described as a "campaign of intimidation" against their business interests.

S Alam Group, a conglomerate with interests in banking, energy, and food, is accused of embezzling billions of dollars from the banking sector during the 15-year rule of the deposed prime minister, Sheikh Hasina.

Bangladesh to sign first-ever EPA with Japan tomorrow

Dhaka eyes auto investment as deal keeps Japanese cars off duty-free list

REFAYET ULLAH MIRDHA

Bangladesh is stepping into a new phase of trade diplomacy as it signs its first Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with Japan tomorrow, a deal meant to preserve duty-free market access after the country's graduation from the least developed country club later this year.

A Bangladesh delegation led by Commerce Adviser Sk Bashir Uddin will leave Dhaka for Tokyo today to sign the agreement, Commerce Secretary Mahabubur Rahman told The Daily Star yesterday.

The EPA, approved by the Advisory Council on January 22, will give Bangladeshi exporters immediate duty-free access to 97 percent of their export basket, including ready-made garments (RMG) and nearly 7,379 other products.

In return, Japan will receive duty-free access to 1,039 products in the Bangladeshi market.

Automobiles from Japan, home to global brands such as Toyota, Honda and Subaru, will not enjoy duty-free entry under the deal, according to the commerce secretary.

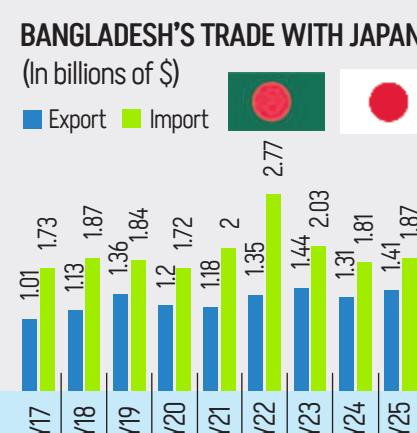
Rahman said the move is deliberate to encourage Japanese entrepreneurs to invest directly in Bangladesh's vehicle segment.

Officials believe this could prompt "handsome" investment in local vehicle manufacturing, possibly reshaping the country's automotive industry.

Japan is already Bangladesh's largest export destination in Asia, with annual shipments hovering around \$2 billion, mostly garments.

Imports from Japan, however, have remained relatively steady at around \$1.8 billion to \$2.7 billion in recent years, according to data from

BANGLADESH'S TRADE WITH JAPAN (In billions of \$)



SOURCES: BB AND EPB

MARKET ACCESS

Bangladesh to get duty-free access for 97% of exports

Coverage includes garments, nearly 7,379 products

Japan to get duty-free access for 1,039 products

Bangladesh to open 97 services sub-sectors

Japan to open 120 services sub-sectors

AUTOMOBILES EXCLUDED

Japanese cars excluded from duty-free entry

Move aims to spur local auto assembly, manufacturing

the Bangladesh Bank and the Export Promotion Bureau (EPB).

Officials say the EPA could help narrow this trade deficit by boosting exports while drawing Japanese capital into industrial zones across the country.

Apart from tariffs, the agreement covers trade in services, investment, customs procedures and intellectual property rights, according to the commerce ministry.

"We are expecting a major shift of Japanese investment in Bangladesh under this EPA, as Japan is looking for a favourable investment destination and is choosing Bangladesh," Commerce Secretary Rahman said.

At present, Japanese investment in Bangladesh stands at about \$500 million, a small slice of Japan's global investment. Still,

several Japanese firms have already set up operations at the dedicated Japanese economic zone at Araihaazar in Narayanganj district.

Under the deal, Bangladesh will open 97 service sub-sectors to Japan, while Japan will open 120 to Bangladesh. Officials expect this to speed up technology transfer and encourage long-term investment.

According to commerce ministry documents, garments will receive immediate duty-free access under Single Stage Transformation rules, a major win for the local RMG sector as the country prepares for the post-LDC competition.

For years, Bangladesh has been looking for trade agreements with major partners and blocs, including India, Turkey, Malaysia, China, the UAE, Indonesia, Nepal, ASEAN and the

Interim govt to leave funds for new pay scale

Finance adviser says

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The interim administration will keep budgetary provisions for implementing the new pay scale for public employees, even though the task itself will fall onto the next elected government, said Finance Adviser Salehuddin Ahmed.

A committee will be formed to review the pay commission recommendations, he said while speaking to journalists at the Secretariat after a meeting of the government's purchase committee on Tuesday.

Pubali Bank, bKash launch automated cash service

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Pubali Bank PLC has signed a partnership agreement with the country's leading mobile financial service (MFS) provider, bKash Limited, to launch 24/7 automated cash management services for bKash agents, distributors and partners across the country.

Md Rabiu Alam, deputy general manager and head of the Alternative Delivery Channel Division of Pubali Bank PLC, and Moinuddin Mohammed Rahgir, chief financial officer of bKash Limited, signed the agreement at the bank's head office in Dhaka recently, according to a press release. Mohammad Ali, managing director and CEO of Pubali Bank PLC, and Kamal Quadir, chief executive officer of bKash Limited, attended the signing ceremony.

Under the partnership, bKash's extensive network of agents and distributors maintaining accounts with Pubali Bank will gain access to round-the-clock automated cash management facilities. The service is designed to enable seamless fund transfers, instant settlements and improved liquidity management, allowing partners to operate



Mohammad Ali, managing director and CEO of Pubali Bank PLC, and Kamal Quadir, chief executive officer of bKash Limited, exchange signed documents of the agreement at the bank's head office in Dhaka recently.

PHOTO: PUBALI BANK

beyond traditional banking hours.

Ahamed Ashraf Sharif, head of treasury at bKash Limited; Endra Mohan Sutradhar, general manager and head of the Software Development Division and chief technology officer; and Md Helal Uddin, general manager and head of the ICT Operation Division, were

present at the event.

Sukanta Chandra Banik, general manager and head of the Gulshan Corporate Branch, and Shah Md Ziaur Rahaman, general manager of the Software Development Division, along with other senior officials from both organisations, were also present.

Eastern Bank offers car purchase financing through Zantrik



Biplob Chandra Biswas, co-founder and chief operating officer of Zantrik Limited, and M Khorshed Anowar, deputy managing director and head of retail and SME banking at Eastern Bank PLC, pose for a photograph after signing the agreement in Dhaka recently.

PHOTO: EASTERN BANK

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Eastern Bank PLC (EBL) recently signed an agreement with Zantrik Limited, an automobile repair and maintenance service provider in Dhaka, to offer financing facilities for car purchases.

M Khorshed Anowar, deputy managing director and head of retail and SME banking at Eastern Bank PLC, and Biplob Chandra Biswas, co-founder and chief operating officer (COO) of Zantrik Limited, signed the agreement in the capital, according to a press release.

Under the agreement, EBL customers will be able to avail financial support when purchasing cars through Zantrik, making vehicle ownership more accessible.

Mohammad Salekeen Ibrahim, head of assets at the bank; Ghalib Shams Islam, acting head of assets (retail); and Muhtasim Mahdi Al-Farooque, managing director of Zantrik Limited, among others, were also present at the signing ceremony.

NCC Bank organises annual business conference

STAR BUSINESS DESK

NCC Bank PLC recently organised a two day "Annual Business Conference 2026" at the Sea Pearl Beach Resort & Spa in Cox's Bazar, aiming to accelerate the bank's business growth through the expansion of service coverage.

Md Nurun Newaz Salim, chairman of NCC Bank PLC, inaugurated the conference as the chief guest, according to a press release.

In his address, Salim congratulated all concerned on achieving the bank's business targets despite

various challenges in the banking sector over the past year. He said NCC Bank's business operations are expanding rapidly and emphasised that maintaining and further enhancing service quality is essential to sustaining this growth.

M Shamsul Arefin, managing director of the bank, presided over the event and said that despite the slowdown in both domestic and global economies, NCC Bank achieved notable success over the past year.

He added that the bank recorded positive growth across all major business areas, including loans

and investments, deposits, export-import trade, and the recovery of non-performing loans.

At the same time, the cost of fund mobilisation declined and asset quality improved significantly, strengthening the bank's overall financial position and bottom line.

Abdus Salam, vice-chairman of the bank; Amjadul Ferdous Chowdhury, Tanjina Ali, Syed Asif Nizamuddin, Khairul Alam Chaklader, Md Moinuddin, Mohammed Sazzad Un Newaz, Shamima Newaz, Morshedul Alam Chaklader and Nahid Banu, directors, attended the programme.



Md Arfan Ali, chairman of Zantrik Fintech Limited, and Kimiwa Sadat, managing director (current charge) of Community Bank Bangladesh PLC, pose for a photograph after signing the agreement at the bank's head office in Dhaka recently.

PHOTO: COMMUNITY BANK

Trust Bank strikes credit guarantee deal with PKSF

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Trust Bank PLC recently signed a credit guarantee agreement under the "Credit Enhancement Scheme" with Palli Karma Sahayak Foundation (PKSF), aiming to expand access to formal financial services for micro-entrepreneurs in underserved regions across the country.

Ahsan Zaman Chowdhury, managing director and CEO of Trust Bank PLC, and Md Fazlul Kader, managing director of Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation, signed the agreement in Dhaka, according to a press release.

Speaking at the signing ceremony, Kader said the initiative would simplify access to formal credit for grassroots micro-entrepreneurs, opening up new avenues for business expansion.



Md Fazlul Kader, managing director of Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation, and Ahsan Zaman Chowdhury, managing director and CEO of Trust Bank PLC, pose for a photograph after signing the agreement in Dhaka recently.

PHOTO: TRUST BANK

Prime Bank hosts seminar on youth empowerment at Buet

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Prime Bank PLC, in collaboration with the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet) and its Career Club, hosted a seminar, titled "Financial Inclusion: Engaging & Inspiring Youth in Banking", on the university campus under its PrimeAcademia initiative, aiming to bridge academia and the evolving financial sector.

Delivering the keynote address, M Nazeem A Choudhury, deputy managing director and head of the consumer and SME banking division at Prime Bank

making in building sustainable financial institutions.

She called on young women to step forward with confidence and assume leadership roles in the financial sector.

Focusing on grassroots empowerment, MM Mahbub Hasan, senior vice-president and head of financial inclusion and school banking, underscored the importance of financial literacy and effective money management.

He noted that early exposure to structured banking knowledge could help nurture financially responsible citizens and future leaders.



M Nazeem A Choudhury, deputy managing director and head of the consumer and SME banking division at Prime Bank PLC, presents a crest to a student at a seminar, titled "Financial Inclusion: Engaging & Inspiring Youth in Banking", on Buet campus in Dhaka recently.

PHOTO: PRIME BANK

PLC, spoke on the transformative role of artificial intelligence (AI), data-driven decision-making and innovation in modern banking, according to a press release.

He encouraged students to prepare for careers that combine technology, creativity and purpose, stressing that inclusive growth would depend on the next generation's ability to adapt and lead.

Shaila Abedin, senior executive vice-president and head of liability, highlighted the importance of female leadership, ethical banking and values-based decision-

Adding an academic perspective, Ferdous Sarwar, professor of the Department of Industrial and Production Engineering at BUET, stressed the need for stronger industry-academia collaboration to better align education with real-world financial challenges and opportunities.

The event drew enthusiastic participation from BUET faculty members, senior bank officials and students, reflecting a shared commitment to advancing financial inclusion, innovation and national development.



Md Nurun Newaz Salim, chairman of NCC Bank PLC, poses for a group photograph with participants of the bank's "Annual Business Conference 2026" at the Sea Pearl Beach Resort & Spa in Cox's Bazar recently.

PHOTO: NCC BANK

Community Bank, Zaytoon Fintech sign Bangla QR deal

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Community Bank Bangladesh PLC has entered into a strategic partnership agreement with Zaytoon Fintech Limited to deliver integrated digital financial solutions, reinforcing their shared commitment to advancing financial inclusion across Bangladesh.

Kimiwa Sadat, managing director (current charge) of Community Bank Bangladesh PLC, and Md Arfan

Ali, chairman of Zaytoon Fintech Limited, signed the agreement at the bank's head office in Dhaka recently, according to a press release.

Through the rollout of Bangla QR merchant acquiring services, the collaboration aims to broaden access to secure and seamless banking and payment services, particularly in geographically dispersed areas and among underserved and marginalised communities.

Under the agreement, the fintech

company will operate as a payment system operator, titled "White Label Merchant Acquirer (PSO-WLMA)", providing Bangla QR-based payment and acquiring services through Community Bank Bangladesh PLC's extensive nationwide distribution network.

Shamsul Haque Sufyani, chief operating officer of the bank, and SK Perves Maraker, head of agent banking, foreign remittance, transaction banking and strategic business unit, were also present.

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Office of the Executive Engineer

Patuakhali PWD Division, Patuakhali

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Date: 02.02.2026

Invitation for e-Tender

e-Tender is invited in the National e-GP System Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) for the procurement of following works given below.

SI No.	Tender ID No.	Invitation Reference No.	Name of works	Tender closing date & time
1	1213905	egp/patua/app/non res-13	Monthly maintenance and repair work of three running lifts at Patuakhali district CJM Court Building.	16.02.2026 12:04pm

This is an online tender, where only e-Tenderers 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. Further information and guidelines are available in the National e-GP System Portal and form e-GP help desk (Email: helpdesk@eprocure.gov.bd).


Executive Engineer
PWD Division, Patuakhali

Implement national logistics policy fast: businesses

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Businesses, especially exporters and stakeholders in the logistics sector, have urged the authorities to move decisively towards implementing the National Logistics Policy 2025 by laying out a clear execution roadmap.

The appeal was made at a focus group discussion (FGD) on logistics sector challenges and opportunities, organised by the American Chamber of Commerce in Bangladesh (AmCham) at the Westin Dhaka yesterday.

Key stakeholders across the logistics ecosystem, including representatives from readymade garments, freight forwarding, inland container depots, shipping lines, airlines, and courier services, attended the discussion.

A 1 percent reduction in logistics costs could increase exports by around 7 percent, particularly as Bangladesh approaches graduation from the least developed country (LDC) category, said M Masrur Reaz, chairman of Policy Exchange Bangladesh.

Referring to the Chittagong port labour strike, he noted that logistics disruptions can severely impact the national economy. Logistics infrastructure and port capacity expansion will be crucial to supporting the projected gross domestic product (GDP) of \$760 billion by 2030, he added.

He also identified major implementation gaps in the National Logistics Policy, including government monopolies in rail and air cargo, weak inter-ministerial coordination, and the absence of a central logistics authority.

AmCham Bangladesh President Sved Ershad Ahmed said that while Bangladesh's logistics sector has evolved, it continues to lag behind regional competitors and remains poorly understood domestically.

He added that the global logistics



An expert says a 1 percent reduction in logistics costs could increase exports by around 7 percent.

PHOTO: STAR/FILE

landscape is being rapidly reshaped by forces such as artificial intelligence (AI) and automation, decarbonisation and fuel transitions, geopolitics, regionalisation, and supply chain resilience, stressing the need to bridge existing knowledge and capacity gaps to better support the country's growing trade and investment needs.

Nusrat Nahid Babi, senior transport specialist for South Asia at the World Bank, highlighted that Bangladesh's logistics reform momentum since 2022 must be reaffirmed by the new

government through clear priorities and high-level consensus.

She outlined a phased reform agenda structured around five thematic pillars: policy and procedural simplification; multimodal logistics infrastructure and connectivity; skills and institutional capacity development; supply chain digitalisation; and investment in logistics.

Md Moinul Huq, country officer at Citibank NA Bangladesh, said there is an urgent need for customs authorities to operationalise provisions of the Customs Act 2023 by clearly defining electronic

document submission and payment modalities.

Mahbubul Anam, managing director of CF Global, stressed the importance of cost rationalisation, capacity expansion, efficient courier services, and robust contingency arrangements to support time-sensitive shipments, particularly as e-commerce driven demand for express logistics continues to grow.

Officials from the US embassy in Dhaka, including Commercial Counsellor Paul Frost and Agricultural Attaché Erin Covert, were also present at the session.

WTO must 'reform or die': talks facilitator

AFP, Geneva

Successfully reforming the WTO is a matter of life and death for the organisation, warns the facilitator of talks on revamping the global trade body.

The World Trade Organization regulates large swathes of global trade but is handicapped by a rule requiring full consensus among members, and a dispute settlement system crippled by the United States. Reform will be at the heart of the WTO's ministerial meeting in Cameroon next month.

The Geneva-based organisation faced structural and geopolitical obstacles long before US President Donald Trump returned to the White House last year, dramatically ratcheting up global trade tensions.

"We need to reform," Norway's ambassador to the WTO Petter Olberg told AFP in a recent interview. "Reform or die."

Olberg said he was preparing a "reform work plan, which we will ask (trade ministers) to endorse" in Yaounde during the March 26-29 meeting.

Many of the WTO's 166 members agree with Olberg on the importance of significantly overhauling the organisation.

"The WTO is at a critical and, in fact, an existential juncture," he warned at the end of January.

The WTO was created in 1995 but is based on a trading system established shortly after the end of World War II.

The need for a revamp has been discussed for years, and was formally

recognised by the organisation's 2022 ministerial conference.

But the discussions have intensified significantly since Trump returned to power, snubbing agreed trade rules and wielding giant tariffs against foes and friends alike.

"Everyone realises there's a sense of urgency that wasn't there before," Olberg said. "This time... we have to do it."

The tariff issue, he stressed, "is not the whole story, but it certainly contributes to this sense of urgency".

"Many, if not all countries are affected by this, small or big."

At the World Economic Forum in Davos last month, WTO chief Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala pointed out that the trade agreements announced by the Trump administration have not been notified to the WTO, as required to ensure they conform with the organisation's rules.

This has raised concern that the deals could potentially violate the WTO's so-called "most-favoured nation" (MFN) principle, which aims to extend any trade advantage granted to one trading partner to all others, in a bid to avoid discrimination.

The United States itself indicated to the WTO last December that it considers the principle "unsuitable for this era", particularly given "some countries' unwillingness to pursue and uphold fair, market-oriented competition" and "insistence on maintaining economic systems that are fundamentally incompatible with WTO principles".

BYD designing new model for India

AFP, Dubai

China's BYD, the world's top electric car-maker, is preparing a new model for India as it looks to continue its rapid growth overseas, executive vice president Stella Li told AFP on Tuesday.

Engineers at BYD's headquarters in Shenzhen, southern China, are working on the design, she said, although the launch date remains unclear.

"India is a market for us but we need to put more effort," Li said at the World Governments Summit in Dubai.

BYD, which began life as a battery company, sold 2.26 million electric vehicles last year, overtaking Elon Musk's Tesla as the world's top manufacturer.

The Chinese company now plans to "introduce a different model fitted for India", Li said, without giving further details.

"My team is working on that, but there is still some work to do," she said. She denied a report that BYD is planning a car assembly plant in India.

Nvidia nears deal to invest \$20b in OpenAI

REUTERS

Nvidia is nearing a deal to invest roughly \$20 billion in OpenAI as part of its latest funding round, a person familiar with the matter told Reuters on Tuesday.

ChatGPT maker OpenAI is looking to raise up to \$100 billion in its latest funding round, valuing it at about \$830 billion, Reuters had reported last week.

Companies including Amazon and SoftBank Group Corp are racing to forge partnerships with OpenAI, betting that closer ties with the artificial-intelligence startup would give them a competitive edge in the AI race.

The Nvidia-OpenAI deal is not finalised yet, the source said.

Bloomberg News reported earlier in the day that Nvidia was nearing a deal with OpenAI.

Interim govt

FROM PAGE B1
the entire national health budget for the current fiscal year.

Asked what assurance there was that the next government would act on the recommendations, Ahmed said they would leave behind both the funds and the proposals.

"I hope it will be implemented successfully."

Responding to a question on why the government was not issuing a gazette notification immediately in line with the pay commission proposals, he said the process was not straightforward.

"To issue a gazette, you have to clearly mention

who will get how much. In short, we are leaving behind a committee to implement these recommendations."

The finance adviser was also asked about election-related spending ahead of the February 12 polls, including the cost of holding a referendum on the same day.

"I don't know about that," he said.

"But we have not been inconsiderate about ensuring a fair election. Whatever money was asked for, we gave. Even when some extra money was requested, I said I would provide that too," said the adviser.

Bangladesh to sign

FROM PAGE B1

Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), to widen its footprint in Asian, African and Latin American markets.

Until now, the country has only signed a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) with Bhutan in 2020. This EPA with Japan marks its first full-fledged trade deal.

Dhaka and Tokyo had been progressing towards this deal since 2022, when then prime minister Sheikh Hasina said Bangladesh was open to negotiating free trade agreements, including with Japan.

Subsequently, a joint study group was formed. Talks gathered pace in July 2023, with both sides signalling their intention to sign the EPA by late 2025 or early 2026, ahead of Bangladesh's LDC graduation.

Momentum picked up after the Advisory Council gave its nod on January 22 this year, following Japan's approval of the draft in December.

Similarly, M Masrur Reaz, chairman of Policy Exchange Bangladesh, called the agreement an excellent development.

Last month, Japan also reaffirmed at the World Trade Organisation (WTO)

that it would continue duty-free market access for Bangladesh for three more years, up to 2029.

Regarding the EPA with Japan, analysts say this sends a message about the country's readiness to engage with major economies and trading blocs.

Abdur Razzaque, chairman of local think tank Research and Policy Integration for Development (RAPID), called the deal a positive signal but stressed that its success would depend on execution.

"It is a positive signal for Bangladesh to the foreign investors as it is a testimony that Bangladesh is capable of signing the deal even with Japan," he said, adding that the country should actively attract Japanese investment, especially in export-oriented sectors such as man-made fibre industries.

Brent crude futures were up 15 cents, or 0.2 percent, at \$67.48 per barrel at 0730 GMT. US West Texas Intermediate crude was up 28 cents, or 0.4 percent, at \$63.49 per barrel.

Both benchmarks rose nearly 2 percent on Tuesday as the military incidents increased fears that a conflict could disrupt oil flows through the Strait of Hormuz or output from Iran.

member of the G-7. It will brighten our image," he said.

If used well, the deal could also open new doors for foreign direct investment, Reaz added.

Oil extends gains

REUTERS, Singapore

Oil prices extended gains on Wednesday after the US shot down an Iranian drone and armed Iranian boats approached a US-flagged vessel in the Strait of Hormuz, rekindling fears of an escalation in tensions between Washington and Tehran.

Brent crude futures were up 15 cents, or 0.2 percent, at \$67.48 per barrel at 0730 GMT. US West Texas Intermediate crude was up 28 cents, or 0.4 percent, at \$63.49 per barrel.

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Maddhapara Granite Mining Company Limited (MGMCL)

(A Company of Petrobangla)

Maddhapara, Parbatipur, Dinajpur

www.mgmcl.gov.bd

Ref: 28.17.0000.000.533.13.0001.19.21-02; Date: 25/01/2026

Date: 29-01-2026

Tender Notice

e-Tender is invited in the National e-GP System Portal (<https://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) for the procurement of following:

Sl. No.	Tender ID	Name of work	Publication date & time	Last selling date & time	Closing date & time	Opening date & time
1	1220043	Hiring the services of three No. Pay loader and Two No. Excavator for two years in order to deliver the stone (Crushed & Boulder) to Truck and Rail wagon within the MGMCL mine area.	29-01-2026 at 8:00pm	22-02-2026, 05:00pm	23-02-2026, 12:00pm	23-02-2026, 12:00pm

This is an 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 (<https://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 banks branches up to 05:00pm on 22/02/2026.

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

29-01-2026

Mir Pinak Iqbal
General Manager (SO&M)
Contact No. 01730-332205

Karnaphuli Gas Distribution Company Limited
(A Company of Petrobangla)
137/A, CDA Avenue, Sholoshahar, Chattogram.

e-Tender Notice

This is to notify for all concerned that the following International Tender has been published through e-GP portal:

SL	Tender ID	Description of Goods	Tender Publication Date & Time	Tender Document Last Selling Date & Time	Last Date & Time for Tender Security Submission	Tender Closing Date & Time	Tender Opening Date & Time
01.	1193619	Procurement of Different Sizes & Capacities of Rotary Gas Meter (105 Nos).	05.02.2026 10:00	31.03.2026 16:00	01.04.2026 14:00	01.04.2026 15:00	01.04.2026 15:00

This is an online tender, where only e-Tender will be accepted in the National e-GP portal and no offline/hard copies will be accepted. The interested person/firms/supplier may visit the web site www.eprocure.gov.bd to get details of the tender.

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's branches. Further information and guidelines are available in the National e-GP portal and from e-GP help desk (helpdesk@eprocure.gov.bd).

(Md. Faruque Hossain)
Deputy General Manager
Purchase Department

GD-260

Akij Resources set to enter electronics retailing

JAGARAN CHAKMA

Akij Resources is making its debut in the electronics retail market with a new brand, Orka, aiming to tap into a domestic sector worth over Tk 30,000 crore and growing 15 percent annually.

The company will open its first showroom today on Kamal Ataturk Avenue in Banani, Dhaka, offering home appliances and office solutions.

Orka will initially sell products from global brands including Samsung, LG, Hitachi, Haier, and Panasonic, covering refrigerators, air conditioners, televisions, and washing machines.

Md Abu Tariq Zia Chowdhury, chief business officer at Akij Resources, said the move responds to unmet demand in the market. "While there are many players, quality service and reliable after-sales support are still lacking. Akij sees an opportunity to fill that gap," he told The Daily Star.

Chowdhury added that the company will act as a distributor for now and leverage its large customer base to gain market share.

He also said Orka will focus on strong after-sales service, aiming to resolve any product issues within 24 hours. "Product availability is no longer the main challenge -- it's the after-sales experience. We want to offer the best to our customers," he said.

The company plans to open at least 35 showrooms across the country by 2026 and 100 outlets by 2028, starting with divisional cities. It also intends to start local production of Orka-branded electronics within a year and build a nationwide network of distributors.

The home appliance market is currently led by Transcom Digital, Butterfly Marketing Limited, Rangs Electronics, Rangs E-Mart, Esquire Electronics, MK Electronics, Walton, and Singer.

Akij Resources, officially established in April 2020, builds on the heritage of the Akij Group, one of Bangladesh's largest conglomerates.



The photo taken recently shows trucks parked next to stone piles at the Burimari land port. Cross-border trade through the land port stagnates, causing a drop in revenues, reducing labour wages, and driving some traders out of business.

PHOTO: S DILIP ROY

Import-export trade declines at Burimari land port

Economic slowdown, political instability and strained bilateral relations are blamed

S DILIP ROY

Trade through one of Bangladesh's busiest land crossings with India has fallen sharply, squeezing government revenues and forcing businesses to suffer as economic slowdown, political instability and strained diplomatic relations choke cross-border commerce.

At Burimari Land Port in northern Bangladesh, imports plunged 17 percent year on year to 24.16 lakh tonnes from India and Bhutan in the 2024-2025 fiscal year (FY25), according to data by the Bangladesh Land Port Authority (BLPA).

Export through the port, however, increased marginally to 1.69 lakh tonnes in FY25 from 1.50 lakh tonnes the previous year.

Overall cargo handling through the land port dropped to 26.38 lakh tonnes, the lowest since FY21 when the volume of cargo was 47.84 lakh tonnes, BLPA data shows.

The slowdown has rippled through the local economy, cutting daily wages for port workers in half and driving some traders out of business entirely.

Ruhul Amin, assistant director of the BLPA at Burimari, said during the first six months of the current fiscal year, 16.05 lakh tonnes of goods were imported, and 90,300 tonnes were exported.

The downturn reflects broader strains in the Bangladesh-India relationship,

domestic political upheaval and slowdown in construction activity, a key driver of demand for imported stone that flows through Burimari.

"The strain in Bangladesh-India political relations is directly affecting trade," said Shamim Ahmed, an import-export trader at the port. "My business has dropped by nearly 70 percent from before. If the current situation persists, I may have to quit the business altogether."

India has imposed various restrictions on Bangladeshi exports, traders say, though the specific measures remain unclear.

The consequences have been most severe for the port's labourers.

Atau Rahman, who represents cargo loading and unloading workers, said daily wages have tumbled to Tk 400-Tk 500 from Tk 800 two years ago as import volumes have dwindled.

"When imports increase, both our workload and income rise," Rahman said.

Some businesses have already closed.

Sahed Ali, another trader, said many of his peers left the area after the political changeover in August 2024.

"Demand for stone has ebbed at the port, as a slowdown in construction activities in the country has reduced stone imports," he said.

The businessman was optimistic that the situation might improve after the national

election.

Government officials acknowledged the revenue impact but said conditions are likely to improve in the coming days.

Delwar Hossain, assistant commissioner of customs at Burimari, said revenues fell last fiscal year but have begun recovering in recent months as trade activity gradually normalises.

"Regular meetings are being held with traders to make Burimari land port more business friendly," Hossain said.

Traders and business groups say restoring cross-border commerce will require domestic political stability, acceleration of economic activities, and an improvement in Bangladesh's diplomatic relationship with India, its largest trading partner and neighbour.

Faruk Hossain, president of the Burimari Land Port C&F Agents Association, said regular discussions and exchanges are underway to normalise import-export trade with India and Bhutan.

"Political instability has caused a slowdown in business," he said, explaining that while import trade is performing relatively well in the current fiscal year, export trade has yet to fully recover.

"We are hopeful that political stability will return after the national election, encouraging traders to re-engage in business," he added.

India settles for least bad option on US trade

REUTERS, Mumbai

India's trade pact with the US leaves much to be desired but will ease a crushing overhang on the rupee. Ten months into President Donald Trump's trade war, the South Asian country is emerging bruised but at least more integrated into the global economy.

Washington is slashing its tariff on imported Indian goods to 18 percent from 50 percent in exchange for a promise from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration to halt buying Russian oil, Trump announced late on Monday, adding that India has committed to buy \$500 billion of US-made goods. Modi's own post did not mention what India has conceded, but it appears to fulfil Washington's demand for lower Indian tariffs on sectors like autos and includes petroleum and defence goods.

Still, even by Trump's standards, the arrangement is short on details. Washington's approach appears slapdash ahead of an expected US Supreme Court ruling on the lawfulness of Trump's trade regime. As of Tuesday afternoon India time, there was no timeline for when the lower tariff would take effect. The purchasing commitment Trump says India has agreed to also seems absurd: the US currently supplies just \$46 billion of India's \$690 billion annual imports, of which only \$192 billion is fuel.

ANALYSIS

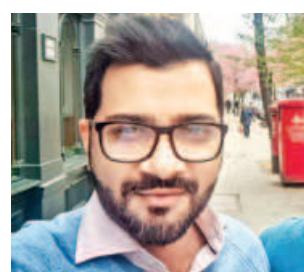
Nonetheless, the broad contours were positive enough to support Indian markets: the rupee, the worst-performing Asian currency of 2025, moved over 1 percent higher to 90.37 against the US dollar, while the benchmark Nifty 50 Index of stocks rose 5 percent. The revised tariff imposed by India's largest trading partner is lower than the 20 percent Washington charges shipments from Vietnam and Bangladesh. That restores a potential advantage for India that global investors first expected back in April. It will also ease fears that the Trump administration will turn hostile on India's IT services, a much larger-value export to the United States.

New Delhi may eventually rue giving up autonomy on its global energy purchases, a pillar of its attempt to maintain a non-aligned foreign policy. But in the short term, the US pact removes the biggest external roadblock to India's growth and will reduce the need for the government to borrow more to prop up employment-intensive industries like textiles. One day, India might even thank Trump for spurring it to shore up its trade ties. Including a deal struck last week with the European Union after years of delays, Modi has secured agreements with its two largest markets together taking 36 percent of Indian exports, BNP Paribas analysts note. That's some consolation for a battered partner.

US President Donald Trump on February 2 said Washington will slash its tariff on Indian goods to 18 percent from 50 percent in exchange for India halting purchases of Russian oil and lowering trade barriers.

Trump said Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi also committed that India would buy American goods worth more than \$500 billion, including energy, coal, technology, agricultural and other products. Trump did not provide a timeline for those purchases, nor for when the lower tariff would go into effect.

Can data annotation for AI solve the unemployment crisis?



ZULKARIN JAHANGIR

scoring -- multiplies the demand for labelled data.

The irony is that as AI scales, its dependence on human judgment increases, not decreases. The smarter the system, the more carefully curated its training must be.

In India, this shift is already visible -- not in glossy labs but in small towns, as depicted in a recent Netflix film named *Humans in the Loop*.

The film follows a woman from rural Jharkhand who finds work at a data-labelling centre training AI systems for international clients, reminding us that intelligence today is literally coded far from urban tech hubs.

Alongside this, thousands of gig workers across Indian districts annotate images, audio and text for global models, earning livelihoods that did not exist a decade ago.

By the end of the decade, this segment could reach a \$40-plus-billion market, with close to a million workers participating across microtasks and contracts.

If neighbouring India can become a vital cog in the global AI supply chain, why not Bangladesh?

Annotation is not capital-intensive. It does not require frontier research, proprietary chips or billion-dollar labs. It rewards scale, coordination, consistency and cost efficiency.

In other words, it behaves like an industry designed for countries with large youth populations, expanding digital connectivity and decentralised labour pools. These are not incidental traits. They are structural endowments. Bangladesh has all three.

Unlike startup centric visions of AI that concentrate opportunity in a

few urban clusters and a narrow elite, annotation distributes work.

It can operate from districts, distant towns or even homes. A laptop, a stable internet connection and basic training are sufficient to enter the market.

For a country struggling to absorb new entrants into formal employment, this matters more than ambition, narratives or speculative promises of innovation-led growth.

Annotation follows a similar logic, but without factories, without physical congestion and without the environmental

to global buyers.

Over time, what looked like low-skill work became a complex industrial ecosystem: compliance systems, export financing, logistics, buyer trust and global integration. The sector did not leap into sophistication; it accumulated it.

Crucially, annotation does not need to invent an institutional architecture from scratch. Much of the scaffolding already exists.

The previous government invested heavily in digital training and decentralised infrastructure -- digital labs, ICT training centres, union digital centres (UDC) and various youth skill programmes that were designed to familiarise young people with basic digital tools.

Many of these initiatives struggled to find sustained market linkages. The infrastructure remained; the demand did not.

Annotation offers that missing demand. These labs can be repurposed as entry-level annotation and quality-assurance training hubs. UDCs can function as distributed coordination points.

Existing public-private training pipelines can be aligned with global data labelling standards rather than generic "ICT literacy". What was once framed as employability training can become export-oriented service

district town working on agricultural image data one month, Bangla speech data the next and medical records after that.

Over time, workflows stabilise, quality improves and contracts grow in size and complexity. What begins as task work turns into firms. What begins as firms turns into clusters. This is not a leap into the unknown; it is an accumulation of capability, trust and reputation over time.

The question, then, is not whether Bangladesh can lead in annotation, but whether it chooses to.

Crucially, Bangladesh does not

The policy requirement here is not visionary. It is administrative. Recognition, standards, contracts and export pathways. Once those are in place, scale follows naturally.

Bangladesh has done this before -- quietly, imperfectly, but effectively -- when garments moved from dispersed units into a globally competitive industry. Annotation offers a second such opening, adapted to a digital economy rather than a manufacturing one.

Bangladesh will not define the future of AI by building the most advanced models. That race is already crowded, capital-heavy and structurally skewed.

But Bangladesh can define its position in the AI economy by becoming indispensable to how intelligence is trained.

Other middle-income economies are already positioning themselves quietly in this space. They are not branding themselves as AI pioneers, nor are they announcing grand national strategies. They are becoming reliable suppliers in the intelligence supply chain, embedding themselves where global demand is steady and recurring.

Bangladesh risks arriving late, not because of a lack of talent or effort, but because of hesitation to recognise annotation as a legitimate economic category rather than a temporary or transitional activity.

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But Bangladesh can define its position in the AI economy by becoming indispensable to how intelligence is trained.

The author is an assistant professor at North South University and member of UNESCO AI Ethics Experts Without Borders. He can be reached at zulkarin@gmail.com



Jobseekers crowd a career fair in Dhaka, reflecting intense competition for limited employment opportunities in the country's tightening job market.

PHOTO: STAR/FILE

There is a historical parallel here that Bangladesh understands better than most. The garment sector did not begin as a high-technology industry or a prestige export. It began as a coordination problem -- large numbers of workers, basic training, quality control and reliable delivery

costs that accompanied earlier industrialisation.

It is labour-intensive but digitally portable. It scales horizontally rather than vertically. And like garments, its real strength lies not in novelty, but in reliability.

Imagine five young people in a