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.

Ataur 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 bullied 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

The July uprising did not emerge from ideology alone; it reflected a deeper structural frustration: large numbers of educated and semi-educated young people facing narrowing pathways into stable work. And no side yet has provided a clear way out of this.

But there is a eureka moment to be had to this conundrum in this era of artificial intelligence.

Every model that now excites policymakers and investors learns through millions of small, human decisions called annotation. The messy world needs to be translated into structured signals for AI to function.

'This image is rice, not road; this sound is a disease, not noise; this sentence is context, not spam,' -- is what annotation trains the algorithm.

This work has already become a global industry worth tens of billions of dollars, expanding quietly beneath the more visible stories of large models, supercomputers and headline-grabbing valuations.

Every new AI application -- healthcare diagnostics, agricultural monitoring, logistics optimisation, surveillance systems, financial risk 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.

PHOTO: STAR/FILE

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

There is a historical parallel here that Bangladesh understands better than most. The garments 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 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.

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

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.

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.

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