

## Trade deficit widens to \$11.55b in first half of FY26

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The gap between what Bangladesh buys and sells abroad, known as trade deficit, grew over 18 percent in the first half (H1) of the current fiscal year 2025-26, driven by rising imports and declining export earnings.

The country's trade deficit ballooned to \$11.55 billion in the six months through December 2025, up from \$9.76 billion in the corresponding period a year earlier.

During the period, import bills rose 5 percent year-on-year to \$33.67 billion, driven partly by pre-Ramadan purchasing, according to Balance of Payments (BoP) data released by the central bank.

Export earnings, meanwhile, slipped 0.9 percent to \$22.12 billion.

Industry insiders expect the deficit to widen further in coming months as imports continue to rise while exports show no clear upward trend.

Global commodity prices remain stable for now, but any uptick would push import costs higher.

The solution, industry representatives argue, lies in diversifying into new export markets and products.

BoP (Jul-Dec FY26)	
<b>Trade gap</b>	<b>Current account deficit</b>
» \$11.55b in FY26	\$343m in FY26
» \$9.76b in FY25	\$518m in FY25
<b>Imports</b>	<b>Financial account</b>
» Increased by 5%	\$2b in FY26
<b>Exports</b>	» Fell by 0.9%
	\$525m in FY25

The broader balance of payments, however, shows a more encouraging trend. The current account deficit actually narrowed to \$343 million from \$518 million a year earlier.

The current account captures the net flow of funds into and out of the country, including payments for goods and services, income earned from overseas investments, and foreign aid. When imports exceed exports, or when outgoing payments for investment and aid are higher than incoming receipts, the account moves into deficit.

Meanwhile, the surplus in the financial account – which tracks cross-border flows related to investments, loans, aid, and other financial transactions – quadrupled to \$2 billion from \$525 million.

The surge in the financial account was buoyed by stronger net foreign direct investment, which climbed to \$828 million from \$553 million.

The net result is a \$1.94 billion balance of payments surplus, reversing last year's \$467 million deficit.

## Bangladesh commits to \$18.5b US farm, energy imports

Reciprocal trade deal with US will see Bangladesh import \$3.5b in farm goods, \$15b in energy

### TRADE DEAL AT A GLANCE

#### TOTAL IMPORT COMMITMENTS FROM US

\$18.5b in farm, energy imports, plus aircraft

#### Agriculture

Bangladesh to buy \$3.5b of US farm products

Include wheat, cotton, soy

#### Energy & aircraft

Local firms to import \$15b of US LNG over 15 years

Bangladesh to buy 14 Boeing jets (option for more)

#### BANGLADESH OPENS MARKET TO

US industrial, farm goods

#### DHAKA GETS

Reciprocal tariffs lowered to 19% from 20%

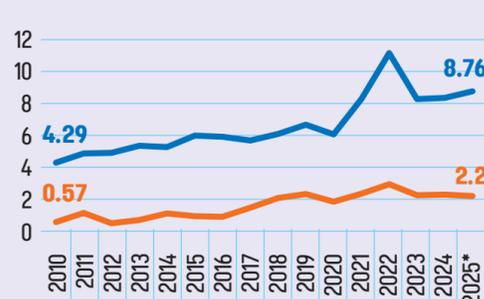
Some products get zero-duty access

Those are linked to use of US cotton, man-made fibres

### Bangladesh's trade with US

In billion \$; \*Jan-Nov

Exports Imports



SOURCE: US CENSUS BUREAU

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Bangladesh will buy \$3.5 billion worth of US agricultural products and \$15 billion of energy under a broader reciprocal trade agreement with Washington, signed on Monday.

The energy imports will take place over 15 years. The overall value of the deal will rise further if the planned purchase of 14 Boeing aircraft by state-owned Biman is included, according to a joint statement issued by Bangladesh and the USA after the signing.

Earlier this week, the interim government said it would sign an agreement with Boeing to buy 14 aircraft valued at around Tk 30,000 to Tk 35,000 crore (\$2.46-\$2.87 billion).

"Bangladesh commits to provide significant preferential market access for US industrial and agricultural goods, including: chemicals; medical devices; machinery and motor vehicles and parts; information and communication technology (ICT) equipment; energy products; soy products; dairy products; beef; poultry; and tree nuts and fruit," the White House said in a statement issued yesterday.

Under the agreement, the US will cut reciprocal tariffs on Bangladeshi goods to 19 percent from 20 percent, with some products qualifying for zero-tariff treatment.

A separate mechanism will allow a specified volume of Bangladeshi textiles and

apparel to enter the American market duty-free, linked to the use of American cotton and man-made fibres, according to the statement.

The agreement was signed after negotiations spanning more than nine months from April last year. In that month, Washington imposed a 37 percent reciprocal tariff on Bangladeshi exports.

The US is the largest single-country export destination for Bangladeshi products.

According to the joint statement, the deal builds on a long-standing economic relationship between the two countries, including the US-Bangladesh Trade and Investment Cooperation Forum Agreement (Ticfa) signed in 2013.

As per the reciprocal tariff deal, Dhaka has also pledged to lower non-tariff barriers by recognising US vehicle safety standards and Food and Drug Administration certificates for medical devices and pharmaceuticals, and by lifting restrictions on remanufactured goods.

Besides, Bangladesh said it will digitalise its customs procedures, allow cross-border data flows, and improve regulatory practices.

"The agreement commits Bangladesh to strengthen labour protections, enforce environmental laws, and adopt robust intellectual property standards, including provisions on geographical indications to safeguard US producers of cheese and meat."

The statement said that Washington, meanwhile, will consider financing investment in critical sectors through institutions such as the Export-Import Bank and the International Development Finance Corporation.

"Bangladesh commits to a robust standard for intellectual property protection and enforcement, including ratifying or acceding to and fully implementing certain international intellectual property treaties," the statement said.

Regarding the deal, Commerce Adviser Sk Bashir Uddin and Commerce Secretary Mahbubur Rahman later briefed reporters at the commerce ministry.

Bashir Uddin said Bangladesh had little choice but to sign the deal, as the US remained its largest export market and the trade balance favoured Bangladesh by more than \$6 billion, or around Tk 1 lakh crore, each year.

Protecting national interests, therefore, required signing the agreement, as other major trading partners had already done, said the adviser.

He added that Bangladesh stood to gain significantly, as more than 86 percent of its exports were garments. The US has agreed to grant zero-duty access for apparel made using US cotton or man-made fibres.

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## BB autonomy plan faces complex issues

Says Salehuddin

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Finance Adviser Salehuddin Ahmed said that there are several complex issues involved in approving the proposal aimed at strengthening Bangladesh Bank's (BB) autonomy, and that they will be handled by the elected government.

"These are difficult decisions. It is not the job of the interim government to make such decisions. The next government will decide on these matters," he said after a meeting of the Advisory Committee on Government Procurement yesterday.

Autonomy of the central bank does not mean changing the governor's status to minister status. It involves several internal issues, such as changing

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## Ramadan banking hours 9:30am to 2:30pm

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Bangladesh Bank (BB) has fixed new office and transaction hours for banks across the country during the holy month of Ramadan in 2026, according to a circular issued yesterday.

Banks will remain open from 9:30am to 4:00pm, Sunday through Thursday. However, customers will be allowed to carry out banking transactions from 9:30am to 2:30pm.

There will be a 15-minute break from 1:15pm to 1:30pm for Zuhr prayers. Despite the recess, banks have been instructed to continue internal coordination to ensure uninterrupted services, similar to practices observed before Ramadan.

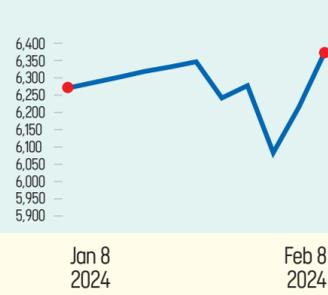
Fridays and Saturdays will remain weekly holidays.

## Election stirs stock revival hopes, but history says otherwise

### MARKET DURING POLLS

ELECTION DATE	RISE/FALL OF INDEX AFTER TWO MONTHS
Jan 7 '24	2% ↓
Dec 30 '18	5% ↑
Jan 5 '14	4% ↑
Dec 29 '08	7% ↓
Oct 1 '01	4% ↑
Jun 12 '96	205% ↑

### UPS AND DOWNS OF DSEX AFTER ONE MONTH OF 2024 ELECTION



### MOVEMENT OF DGEN AFTER ONE MONTH OF 2008 ELECTION



AHSAN HABIB

Elections rarely spark dramatic rallies in Bangladesh's stock market. The trend has been consistent at least in the last six parliamentary elections. Yet, stakeholders hope this time will be different.

Analysing capital market trends for the last six parliamentary elections, The Daily Star found that only once, in 1996, did the Dhaka Stock Exchange (DSE) surge dramatically post-election, rocketing 200 percent within two months before crashing spectacularly.

Every other election delivered tepid results or outright declines. The 2008 and 2024 elections actually pushed the index downward.

The elections of 2001, 2014, and 2018 managed meagre 4-7 percent gains over two months, hardly the stuff of investor euphoria.

Most tellingly, the market's greatest rally came in 2010, utterly disconnected from any electoral momentum.

Yet, DSEX, the benchmark index of DSE, has already climbed 460 points, or 9 percent, over the past month in anticipation of the 13th National Parliament Election slated for February 12.

Market analysts say many foreign investors are waiting for the election. They think investors will start to pour money into the market as some of the listed firms are now trading at low prices, and foreign exchange-related tensions has also eased.

Saiful Islam, president of the DSE Brokers Association, believes this time genuinely differs.

"This time, foreign investors and institutional investors are waiting for investment. So, after a political government

comes into power, the stock market will behave positively," he said.

Fundamentally sound companies are trading at bargain prices, he argues, and once a government takes office, the market will respond positively.

But the current rally tells a less optimistic story. Junk stocks are dominating turnover and gainers' lists.

One merchant banker put it bluntly, saying, "Although the stock market started to rebound, the elected government will have to bring good companies and ensure good governance in the market to keep the rising trend going."

"Otherwise, the market will rise on the basis of some low-performing companies which will not be sustainable in the future," he added, noting that junk stocks are taking

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## Ispahani Centre signs lease deal with YKK Bangladesh

STAR BUSINESS DESK

The newly built Ispahani Centre, a nine-storey commercial complex at Ispahani Moor in Lalkhan Bazar, Chattogram, has signed a lease agreement with YKK Bangladesh Pte Ltd.

Under the agreement, YKK Bangladesh's sales office will be located on the fifth floor of the building and operate their business activities.

Shinobu Nakayama, administrative coordinator of YKK Bangladesh Pte Ltd,

and Ali Ispahani, director of the Ispahani Group, signed the agreement at a ceremony held at the Avenue Hotel in the port city recently, according to a press release.

Established in 2001, YKK Bangladesh Pte Ltd is a subsidiary of Japan based YKK Group and manufactures zippers and buttons for the apparel industry.

Designed to host a curated mix of office, retail and dining tenants, Ispahani Centre underscores the Ispahani Group's focus on developing planned, multi-use commercial spaces in Chattogram.



**Shinobu Nakayama, administrative coordinator of YKK Bangladesh Pte Ltd, and Ali Ispahani, director of the Ispahani Group, exchange signed documents of the lease agreement at the Avenue Hotel in Chattogram recently.** PHOTO: ISP AHANI GROUP

## Latif Hasan appointed DMD of United Commercial Bank

STAR BUSINESS DESK

United Commercial Bank PLC (UCB) has appointed M Latif Hasan to the post of deputy managing director (DMD) and head of structured corporate.

Hasan will lead the structured corporate division, concurrently, of the bank.

Prior to joining UCB, he was serving at Habib Bank Limited (HBL), Bangladesh, as head of corporate banking, according to a press release.

With over three decades of experience in the banking industry, he brings deep expertise and strategic insight, which are expected to further strengthen UCB's corporate banking capabilities.

Over the course of his career, Hasan has held several senior leadership positions at both international and local banks.

He previously served at Standard Bank PLC, Citibank, N.A.; Eastern Bank PLC; and Prime Bank PLC, working in different capacities.

His professional strengths include corporate relationship management, business development, credit and risk management, finance, and banking operations.

Hasan obtained his master's degree in finance from the University of Dhaka and an MBA from Victoria University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia.

He is a CSA (Credit Skill Assessment)-certified professional from Omega Performance, the US.



**M Latif Hasan**



PHOTO: BATA BANGLADESH

**Faria Yasmin, managing director of Bata Bangladesh, and actress Sabila Nur, the brand's ambassador, jointly inaugurate the footwear maker's new retail store at Meridian Kohinoor City Shopping Mall in Chattogram yesterday.**

## Bata opens new retail store in Chattogram

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Bata Bangladesh has opened a new retail outlet at Meridian Kohinoor City Shopping Mall in Chattogram, marking another step in the footwear maker's expansion of its modern retail network.

The 5,200-square-foot store, located on Level-6 of the mall, features Bata's latest store design with enhanced product displays and a wide range of footwear for men, women and children.

Faria Yasmin, managing director of Bata Bangladesh, and actress Sabila Nur, the brand's ambassador, jointly inaugurated the store, according to a press release.

To mark the launch, Bata hosted a programme, titled "Meet & Greet with Sabila Nur", offering shoppers an interactive experience and strengthening the brand's engagement with customers

in Chattogram.

The new outlet underscores Bata Bangladesh's continued focus on expanding its retail footprint while upholding its commitment to comfort, quality and style.

The footwear maker said the opening reflects its broader goal of delivering a more elevated, global-standard shopping experience for customers across the country. Kohinoor Kamal, chairperson of Meridian Group, and Akib Kamal, director, attended the event as special guests.

Elias Ahmed, finance director; Arfanul Hoque, retail director; Nusrat Hasan, head of marketing; and Md Saidur Rahman, chief of I&D and franchise, along with other officials from Bata Bangladesh and Meridian Kohinoor City, were also present.

## Prime Bank, LifePlus partner to expand digital healthcare services

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Prime Bank PLC has recently signed an agreement with LifePlus Bangladesh Ltd, a sister concern of the Labaid Group, to expand digital healthcare access for Prime Bank customers through an integrated digital platform.

Joarder Tanvir Faisal, head of cards and retail assets of Prime Bank PLC, and Sharif Md Abid, chief executive officer of LifePlus Bangladesh Ltd, signed the agreement at Prime Aspire on Gulshan Avenue in Dhaka, according to a press release.

Under the partnership, Prime Bank

customers will be able to directly access the LifePlus app through the MyPrime Internet Banking Portal, enabling them to conveniently avail a wide range of healthcare services.

The collaboration aims to simplify access to digital healthcare solutions and promote better health management for customers.

AZM Fouz Ullah Chowdhury, senior vice president and head of digital channels of the bank, and Md Al-Hasib, head of business of LifePlus Bangladesh Ltd, along with senior officials from both organisations, were also present at the event.



PHOTO: PRIME BANK

**Sharif Md Abid, chief executive officer of LifePlus Bangladesh Ltd, and Joarder Tanvir Faisal, head of cards and retail assets of Prime Bank PLC, pose for a photograph after signing the agreement at Prime Aspire on Gulshan Avenue in Dhaka recently.**

## Jamuna Bank signs MoU with Microcredit Regulatory Authority



PHOTO: JAMUNA BANK

**Md Nure Alom Mahadi, executive director of the Microcredit Regulatory Authority, and AKM Atiqur Rahman, deputy managing director and chief information officer of Jamuna Bank PLC, pose for a photograph after signing the memorandum of understanding at the former's head office in Agargaon, Dhaka recently.**

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Jamuna Bank PLC has signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Microcredit Regulatory Authority (MRA) of Bangladesh to enhance institutional cooperation and expand modern banking services.

AKM Atiqur Rahman, deputy managing director and chief information officer of Jamuna Bank PLC, and Md Nure Alom Mahadi, executive director of the Microcredit Regulatory Authority, signed the MoU at the latter's head office in Agargaon, Dhaka recently, according to a press release.

Under the agreement, Jamuna Bank will provide payroll banking services and install a cash recycling machine (CRM) at the MRA premises to ensure smooth salary disbursement, efficient cash management, and improved banking convenience for MRA officials and employees.

The partnership reflects Jamuna Bank's commitment to technology-driven banking solutions and its continued focus on digital transformation and institutional efficiency. The collaboration marks another step forward in the bank's journey towards digital transformation and inclusive banking, the release added. Other senior officials from both organisations were also present.

## Digital ambitions

FROM PAGE B4

He added, "There is no clear plan for employing the thousands of computer science graduates entering the job market, even as the tech sector faces job cuts. Both parties mention AI, but neither addresses the risks it brings."

**NCP & CPB PROPOSE CITIZEN-CENTRIC APPROACHES**

The NCP envisions a citizen-centric digital state, creating 1.5 million digital economy jobs in BPO, freelancing, remote work, data services, cybersecurity, and customer support, supported by digital hubs in all 64 districts.

A unified NID-based digital ID will act as a single gateway to all public services, while government services will be fully digitised, paperless, and trackable.

The party also plans a secure national data infrastructure,

cashless payments, a central bank digital currency (CBDC), fair digital taxation, and data-driven social protection to underpin an accountable and inclusive digital Bangladesh.

The CPB prioritises science, technology, and ICT for national development, emphasising public welfare over corporate profit and surveillance.

Within six months, it will launch a National Science, Technology, and Research Policy linking education, research, and industry, with public research funding allocated transparently through peer review.

ICT and AI will follow human-centred ethical guidelines, supporting reskilling, strengthening data protection, and building digital infrastructure that safeguards citizens' rights.

## Jamuna Electronics holds partners' meet in Cox's Bazar

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Jamuna Electronics and Automobiles Limited (JEAL) recently organised a three-day "Partners Meet 2026" in Cox's Bazar.

Dealers and business partners of the automobile company from across the country took part in the event to further strengthen relationships between the company and its partners.

Monika Islam, director of Jamuna Group, inaugurated the programme as the chief guest, according to a press release.

At the event, Salim Ullah Salim, marketing director of Jamuna Electronics, said, "This event is not just an ordinary gathering; it is a strong bridge of connection with our business partners. To achieve our dreams, we must all work together."

Salim added that Jamuna Electronics would strengthen its brand promotion and marketing activities in the future and provide full support to help partners increase sales.



PHOTO: JAMUNA GROUP

**The awarded partners of Jamuna Electronics and Automobiles Limited pose for a group photograph with crests at the "Partners Meet 2026" programme in Cox's Bazar recently.**

## Farm pledges look achievable

FROM PAGE B4

Without a shift in approach, he said, agriculture will continue to face long-term structural problems.

Agricultural economist Jahangir Alam Khan said meeting the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on food and nutrition would require annual agricultural growth of at least 4 percent.

None of the manifestos explains how that target would be achieved, he notes. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the agriculture growth rate stood at 1.79 percent in fiscal year (FY) 2024-25, the lowest level recorded in the past 11 years.

Khan expressed concern over rising dependence on agricultural imports and criticised the absence of a clear import substitution strategy.

Farming land is shrinking by around 0.2 percent each year, and more than half of farmland is losing fertility, yet manifestos offer no concrete plan for either intensive cultivation or soil restoration to

tackle these issues, he said.

"Most parties rely on generic promises – such as lowering input costs or introducing precision agriculture – without offering timelines, strategies or realistic assessments," said M Asaduzzaman, former research director at the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS).

The manifestos completely overlook the fact that around 50 percent of the farmers in the country own less than one acre of land, he added.

"Advanced farming techniques are mentioned, but there is little explanation of how landless or marginal farmers would benefit from these," Asaduzzaman also said that Bangladesh has the lowest land productivity in South Asia, yet no manifesto presents a clear plan to address it.

Water management remains largely unaddressed by the political parties. Despite abundant rainfall,

Bangladesh depends heavily on groundwater for irrigation, unlike many other countries, he stated.

A top official of a prominent agribusiness company in the country is of the opinion that the issues highlighted by political parties are largely realistic and achievable if implemented properly.

Bringing up the "Farmer's Card" as an example, the official said the measure could quickly improve access to loans and subsidies for water and electricity, with an immediate impact on farmers' lives.

Munjer Alam, an agri-entrepreneur from Chapainawabganj, said critical areas such as food processing have been overlooked in the manifestos. More attention in those areas could quickly raise incomes and create rural jobs.

"Educated youth are increasingly entering agriculture, but current policies offer little guidance or opportunity for their meaningful engagement," he added.

## Oil eases

REUTERS

Oil prices edged down on Tuesday as traders gauged the potential for supply disruptions after US guidance for vessels transiting the Strait of Hormuz kept attention squarely on tensions between Washington and Tehran.

Brent crude oil futures were down 16 cents, or 0.23 percent, at \$68.88 a barrel by 0800 GMT. US West Texas Intermediate crude fell 20 cents, or 0.31 percent, to \$64.16.

That's after prices rose more than 1 percent on Monday, when the US Department of Transportation's Maritime Administration advised US-flagged commercial vessels to stay as far from Iran's territorial waters as possible and to verbally decline Iranian forces permission to board if asked.

About a fifth of the oil consumed globally passes through the Strait of Hormuz between Oman and Iran, making any escalation in the area a major risk to global oil supplies.



People queue at a truck selling subsidised food in Dhaka's Suritola area. The government says grain reserves have reached a six-year high of 2.21 million tonnes, ensuring food security and continued subsidy programmes.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

## India expands talks on critical minerals supply

REUTERS, New Delhi

India is in talks with Brazil, Canada, France and the Netherlands over deals to jointly explore, extract, process and recycle critical minerals, sources said, as it broadens its global outreach to secure supplies of key raw materials.

The focus would be on lithium and rare earths, and India would also seek access to mineral processing technologies, the sources said, declining to be identified because the discussions are confidential.

Heavy reliance on arch rival China, which dominates global supplies of many minerals and has advanced mining and processing technology, underscores the need for India to reach out to a range of countries as it accelerates its energy transition to cut emissions, mining experts said.

However, from discovery to production, mining can take years, as exploration alone runs five to seven years and often ends without a viable mine.

India aims to replicate elements of a critical minerals agreement it signed with Germany in January, which covers exploration, processing and recycling, as well as the acquisition and development of mineral assets in both countries and in third countries, one of the sources said.

"There are requests and we are talking to France, Netherlands and Brazil while the agreement with Canada is under active consideration," the source said.

# Govt food grain stock hits six-year high: adviser

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The government's food grain stock has climbed to its highest level in six years, Food Adviser Ali Imam Majumder said yesterday.

The current food grain reserves have surpassed the nation's designated safety threshold, marking a remarkable achievement in strengthening the country's food security, he said.

Bangladesh needs about 13.5 lakh tonnes of food grains to maintain a comfortable reserve. Current stocks, however, stand at more than 22.1 lakh tonnes, according to the adviser.

He shared the figures at a press conference at the Secretariat in Dhaka.

The current accumulated reserves are approximately 8.34

lakh tonnes higher than the stock recorded during the same period last year.

With reserves well above the benchmark, the next administration will not be under pressure to rush decisions when it takes charge, he said. Instead, it will have the space to plan its next steps in a measured way.

Majumder added that subsidy programmes would continue uninterrupted, as the stock position remains strong.

"We have done everything necessary to keep the market stable."

Reflecting on his tenure, he said he had worked to the best of his ability within the scope of his role, while accepting shortcomings in some areas.

"There are failures in some

areas, and I take responsibility for those."

He also said that he had already submitted his asset statement to the Cabinet Division.

At the briefing, a comparative report on food stocks over the past six years, from 2021 to 2026, was presented. The report showed that as of February 10, the country's rice reserves stood at more than 18.76 lakh tonnes, alongside 3.22 lakh tonnes of wheat and 1.07 lakh tonnes of paddy.

In 2021, the total food grain stock was only 6.69 lakh tonnes.

This rose sharply to 20.09 lakh tonnes in 2022 and 20.26 lakh tonnes in 2023. However, the stock declined in subsequent years, dropping to 16.84 lakh tonnes in 2024 and further to 13.76 lakh tonnes in 2025.

## Global solar, wind capacity growth slowed last year

### Analysis shows

AFP, Bangkok

Planned or under-construction solar and wind projects slowed last year, analysis showed Tuesday, casting doubts on whether countries will hit a goal of tripling renewable capacity by decade end.

Dozens of nations agreed in 2023 to triple renewable energy capacity by 2030 as part of efforts to limit global warming.

But announcements and construction starts of new wind and solar projects grew 11 percent in 2025 – down from 22 percent in the previous year, as wind development projects faced hurdles, Global Energy Monitor (GEM) said.

"Wind developers experienced political barriers and a streak of failed wind power auctions in wealthy nations," GEM research analyst Diren Kocakusak said.

US President Donald Trump has blocked wind projects, and made no secret of his antipathy towards renewables, though the global slump was not attributable to any one country, Kocakusak said.

GEM's research also found that just a small fraction of wind and solar growth came from rich G7 countries, with the "centre of gravity" now shifting "decisively toward emerging and developing economies."



As has been the case for years, China is expanding renewable capacity on a scale unmatched elsewhere.

It accounted for around a third of global capacity growth in 2025 – 1.5 terawatts – more than growth in the next six countries combined.

But that was not enough to set the world on track to meet the 2030 goal.

Even if all the projects currently announced and under construction proceed, the world would still fall short. GEM's research has found almost 40 percent of planned projects begin operations after their announced start date, or are put on hold or scrapped.

However, Kocakusak said that did not mean the goal was out of reach.

"Momentum appears to be slowing, but that's not due to a lack of potential," he told AFP.

There is still "enough time" for countries to ramp up capacity, and solar projects that have not yet been announced could be completed before 2030, he said. Wind projects can take longer to get up and running.

More than 3.5 terawatts of wind and solar projects have also been announced without a confirmed start date, and could help meet the 2030 goal if they come online quickly enough.



Farah Kabir, country director of ActionAid Bangladesh, receives an aid cheque worth Tk 45 lakh from Ziaul Karim, head of communications and external affairs at Eastern Bank PLC, at the bank's head office in Dhaka on Monday.

PHOTO: EASTERN BANK

## ActionAid teams up with Eastern Bank to support 150 vulnerable girls

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Eastern Bank PLC (EBL) has partnered with ActionAid Bangladesh, a non-governmental organisation, to support 150 marginalised girls under the initiative titled "Support 150 Girl Children".

Through the corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiative, EBL will provide one year of support to girls aged 4 to 18 from underprivileged families in Khilgaon, Narayanganj, Cox's Bazar, Lalmonirhat and Naogaon.

The programme will focus on ensuring access to education, essential study materials, life skills training and community-based protection mechanisms to create a safe and enabling environment for their growth.

Ziaul Karim, head of communications and external affairs at Eastern Bank PLC, handed over a cheque worth over Tk 45 lakh to support the initiative to Farah Kabir, country director of ActionAid Bangladesh, at a ceremony held at the bank's head office in Dhaka on Monday, according to a press release. "Education and protection are

fundamental rights, not privileges. By supporting these 150 girls, we are investing in a future where they can grow with dignity, confidence and opportunity—free from exploitation and inequality," said Karim.

The initiative aligns with ActionAid's Local Rights Programme (LRP) model, which emphasises continuity in education, life skills development and community-driven engagement to help vulnerable children realise their full potential.

Farah Kabir said, "This partnership with Eastern Bank reflects how the private sector can play a meaningful role in advancing children's rights. Together, we are ensuring that vulnerable girls are not left behind and are given pathways toward opportunity and hope."

Maruf Mohammad Shehab, head of innovation and resource mobilisation of the NGO; Kh Shams Al Muzaddid, manager of philanthropy and private sector partnerships; Abdullah Al Mamun, manager of child sponsorship and child rights; and Md Maskur Reza, head of business information systems of the bank, among others, were also present.

## 'Americans aren't shouldering tariff hit' Bangladesh commits

REUTERS

Federal Reserve Governor Stephen Miran on Monday argued the Trump administration's policy of trade tariffs has proved more benign than many had feared, in comments that argued that foreigners and their firms are the ones primarily paying for the tax hikes, rather than Americans.

The comments by Miran, who was appointed by President Donald Trump last year to fill an unexpected vacancy on the Fed's Board of Governors, appeared to contradict data showing that Americans bear the burden of paying for tariffs.

"I think the world has been coming in my direction on a number of issues," Miran said at an appearance at the Boston University Questrom School of Business. He pointed to tariffs and their impact on the economy and noted that a year ago, at the start of the second Trump administration, there were widespread fears that the import tax surge would damage the economy.

### Election stirs stock

FROM PAGE B1

place in the top turnover, and the gainers' list currently.

Islam himself acknowledges the structural rot. "Sustainability of the market will depend on how many good companies the next government can enlist in the stock market, and whether they let institutions run independently."

Proper reforms will also be necessary in the stock market framework.

On reform issues, he questioned the necessity of the swollen ranks of merchant banks and asset management companies in the country.

"A large number of firms are creating market distortion. So, a reform is necessary here," he noted.

### 'Americans aren't shouldering tariff hit'

FROM PAGE B1

If local exporters use 70 percent US inputs in garment production, that portion will be exempt from the 19 percent reciprocal tariff, he said.

However, existing tariffs will continue to apply, as the reciprocal tariff is additive to the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) rate.

The adviser said only around 10 percent of Bangladeshi exports to the US were likely to face the 19 percent tariff, as some 2,500 products, including pharmaceuticals, plywood, fisheries and food items, would also qualify for zero-duty access.

Bangladesh had sought a free trade agreement with the US, but this was not possible because the Trump administration was unwilling to pursue such a deal, said Bashir Uddin.

He added that local textile and spinning mills would benefit, as exporters would need to follow a double-stage transformation process to qualify for duty-free access.

The agreement is also expected to encourage higher imports from the US. Bangladesh usually imports

food worth about \$15 billion a year, and purchases of American cotton, soybeans and wheat have already risen since negotiations began last year, owing to competitive prices and quality.

During the talks, Bangladesh focused mainly on boosting garment exports, Bashir Uddin said.

Mahbubur Rahman said both the economic partnership agreement with Japan and the reciprocal tariff deal with the US would take effect once formal notifications were issued by all sides.

Bangladesh has offered substantial market access for US goods across its tariff schedule, including phased tariff reductions over five or ten years, an approach the commerce ministry said was uncommon in comparable agreements.

The deal also includes commitments on labour, environment, transparency and governance, along with an exit clause proposed by Bangladesh.

Either side may withdraw from the agreement with two months' notice, the secretary said.

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) yesterday welcomed the agreement.

In a statement, BGMEA said, "We believe this provision will further enhance Bangladesh's access to the US market."

However, to effectively utilise this opportunity, it will be essential to ensure proper valuation and traceability of US-origin raw materials used in production."

Syed Ershad Ahmed, president of the American Chamber of Commerce in Bangladesh, said the US remained one of Bangladesh's most important export destinations, especially for ready-made garments, and that the deal would provide greater predictability for exporters while preserving competitiveness.

He added that the zero-tariff provision for products made with US inputs could deepen supply chain integration, encourage value addition and strengthen backward linkages between US producers and Bangladeshi manufacturers.

## BB autonomy plan faces

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but could not be completed. The interim government has no political agenda behind these reforms, he stressed. These reforms were undertaken in the public interest and must be carried forward by the next government.

Speaking about the overall economic situation, the adviser said the interim government inherited a collapsed economy and managed to bring it to a stable position, though many challenges remain.

Economic activity and trade must accelerate. Otherwise, employment will not increase. Reducing inflation remains a challenge and cannot be addressed through monetary policy alone – improvements on the supply side are also necessary.

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He added that the banking sector continues to face significant challenges, with deep-rooted problems requiring tough measures.

The BB governor has taken steps in this regard, which are praiseworthy, but "praise alone is not enough," the adviser said. There is still a shortage of credit supply and a lack of depositor confidence in the banking sector, although confidence has partially returned.

Regarding small shareholders of the five merged banks, he said the finance ministry is working on ways to compensate their losses. The issue is quite complex, and options such as providing shares in the new banks or offering some form of financial compensation are being considered.

# Farm pledges look achievable, delivery will be the real test

SUKANTA HALDER

As Bangladesh heads towards the February 12 parliamentary election, agriculture has found prominent space in the manifestos of political parties.

Major parties, including the BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami, Islami Andolan Bangladesh, National Citizen Party (NCP) and the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), have placed farming high on their policy agenda.

Most of the pledges appear realistic on paper. But agri economists and sector specialists say delivery will depend less on promises and more on long-term political will and a clear stand against unchecked corporatisation of farming.

According to them, genuine reform requires empowering farmers, especially small and marginal ones, rather than relying on broad commitments without clear execution plans.

While parties have spoken of incentives, lower input costs and access to agri machinery, experts note that most manifestos are somewhat vague on how these benefits will actually reach farmers on the ground.



Experts say genuine reform requires empowering farmers, especially small and marginal ones, rather than relying on broad commitments without clear execution plans.

PHOTO: MOSTAFA SHABUJ



The election comes at a difficult moment for agriculture. Climate change has increased the frequency of flooding, droughts, salinity and cyclones. Heat stress is rising, while cultivable land is shrinking, adding pressure to food production and rural livelihoods.

## WHAT PARTIES ARE PROMISING

In its manifesto, BNP has outlined 15 agriculture-related commitments. Major points include introducing a "Farmer's Card", ensuring comprehensive farmer protection, waiving agricultural loans up to Tk 10,000 and reviving the Barind project.

The party has also proposed setting up special cold storage facilities for mango preservation, ensuring fair prices for crops, protection of farmland

and construction of procurement centres. Other pledges include offering agri insurance, setting up agri export zones in the northern region and addressing climate risks through precision farming.

Meanwhile, Jamaat-e-Islami has proposed 16 agendas, focusing on food and nutrition security through sustainable farming.

The party's manifesto highlights lowering input costs, offering fair prices, subsidies and credit support, bolstering export growth, supporting climate resilience, utilising modern technology, offering land protection, irrigation expansion, entrepreneurship development, research and developing stronger markets to raise productivity, employment and farmer incomes.

Islami Andolan Bangladesh has presented a 22-point plan that emphasises climate-smart agriculture,

mechanisation, incentives, fair prices, easy credit and digital market access.

It also promises to reduce post-harvest losses through better storage and transport facilities, land reform, cooperative development, building direct links between farmers and buyers and stronger government procurement to protect small and marginal farmers.

The National Citizen Party (NCP) has proposed three key measures. Strengthening domestic seed research, preservation, and distribution is one of them. The other two measures are ensuring food sovereignty alongside food security and intensifying drives against food adulteration with strict penalties.

The Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) has outlined a broad programme covering minimum crop prices, expanding government procurement, land reform, increasing the effectiveness

of cooperative-based markets, climate-resilient farming, rural infrastructure, ensuring year-round sustainable employment for agriculture-based workers, agro-industry development and participatory water and resource management.

## BOLD PLEDGES, THIN EXECUTION PLANS

Abdul Bayes, former economics professor at Jahangirnagar University, said meaningful progress in agriculture is impossible without firm political commitment.

Growing corporatisation poses a serious threat to small farmers, he said, but none of the political parties clearly explain a strategy to protect farmers from corporate dominance.

Bayes also pointed out that while climate change is mentioned frequently in the manifestos, the references lack depth.

READ MORE ON B2

# Essential medicines and policy reality

MD ABU ZAFOR SADEK

To improve access to public health services in underdeveloped and developing countries, the World Health Organization (WHO) first published a list of 200 medicines in 1977, identifying them as essential medicines.

The WHO medicine selection process is based on three core criteria: priority public health needs, relevance to population health, and the efficacy, safety and affordability of medicines. Under WHO guidelines, essential medicines should be available in appropriate dosage forms to meet patient needs, be of assured quality and be accessible at affordable prices. The concept of essential medicines serves as the foundation for public sector medicine procurement and supply, insurance reimbursement, medicine donations and local pharmaceutical production. The WHO updates its essential medicines list every two years in response to evolving needs. The current list contains about 500 medicines.

Recently, with the aim of expanding healthcare access for a larger share of the population, Bangladesh increased its national essential medicines list to 296 items by adding 135 new medicines. This is a commendably positive step. However, two accompanying policy measures raise serious concerns about the sustainable development of the pharmaceutical industry. The first is the requirement that at least 25 percent of a company's total medicine sales must come from essential medicines. The second is the imposition of strong price controls.

Bangladesh currently has about 1,500 generic medicines, of which roughly 20 percent are classified as essential. In most cases, essential medicines are priced several times lower than non-essential medicines, and many also have market alternatives.

Expecting companies to generate 25 percent of total sales from medicines that make up only 20 percent of products and are significantly lower priced is unrealistic for most manufacturers.

Capacity constraints further complicate the situation. Not all companies can produce every dosage form. Firms with limited dosage form capabilities may face even greater difficulties, as they would be forced to make new investments to meet government targets while operating in low-price segments. From a business perspective, this is an impractical expectation. Market dynamics add another layer of complexity. Growth does not necessarily follow the structure of the essential medicines list. In 2025, the pharmaceutical market in Bangladesh grew at an average annual rate of 9.2 percent. Yet the largest segment, anti-ulcerants, grew by only 7.2 percent. By contrast, cardiovascular and nervous system medicines expanded faster than the overall market, at 14.42 percent and 10.36 percent respectively.

These therapeutic classes are not evenly represented in the essential medicines list. It is therefore natural for companies to prioritise higher growth segments to ensure survival. Market momentum is increasingly driven not by large established segments, but by medium and small specialised therapies, pointing to gradual diversification within the industry. Many specialised therapy medicines are priced several hundred times higher than the average essential medicine. Not all companies manufacture these products, nor do all need to. Firms that depend mainly on technologically advanced, high-value medicines will find it almost impossible to meet a 25 percent essential medicine sales requirement.

Another question merits attention: does Bangladesh actually need an annual essential medicine market approaching Tk 10,000 crore, equivalent to 25 percent of total sales across all companies? This issue requires a proper survey-based assessment. Price regulation also deserves careful scrutiny. The cost of pharmaceutical raw materials varies widely depending on sourcing and import volumes. Operational, production and transportation costs differ across companies and directly influence final prices.

Against this backdrop, it is worth examining whether markup-based or direct price control mechanisms can adequately reflect these business realities. Excessive price control can have negative short and long-term effects, including reduced incentives for quality improvement, supply shortages, distorted competition and weaker investment. Rather than rigid price controls, a rational and realistic pricing framework, developed through inclusive participation of all stakeholders, could better protect consumers while supporting the long-term sustainability of Bangladesh's pharmaceutical industry.

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# Gold ticks lower

REUTERS

Gold prices eased on Tuesday, as improved risk appetite lifted global equities, while investors awaited a series of US economic data later this week that could shape the outlook for US interest rates.

Spot gold fell 0.5 percent to \$5,040.47 per ounce by 0900 GMT. It had scaled a record high of \$5,594.82 on January 29.

US gold futures for April delivery lost 0.3 percent to \$5,062.60 per ounce.

"The start of the week has been marked by a resurgence in risk appetite across financial markets, reflected in gains in equity indices, which has weighed on gold prices," said ActivTrades analyst Ricardo Evangelista.

Global stocks advanced in Asian trade, led by an extended rally in Tokyo after Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's decisive election victory over the weekend.

# Digital ambitions take centre stage

Rural connectivity, power outages, and skill shortages cast doubt on promises



MAHMUDUL HASAN

With Bangladesh striving to build a digital future, information and communications technology (ICT) and telecom have moved from specialised policy areas to key issues in the electoral debate.

In their manifestos for the upcoming general election, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, the National Citizen Party (NCP), and the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) have outlined broad plans for the sector, including ambitious job creation targets, digital infrastructure goals, and promises of transparency, innovation, and inclusion.

While the parties present forward-looking visions, implementing them will require systemic reforms, stronger institutions, and investment in human capital.

Bangladesh's ICT and telecom sector has seen rapid growth, with mobile use surging and internet penetration increasing. Yet service quality often remains poor, and digital public infrastructure has frequently failed to deliver efficient, citizen-centred services. Rural broadband reliability is uneven, power outages disrupt networks, and licensing complexity adds costs without improving services.

Against this backdrop, political parties are seeking to persuade voters they can build on past progress and tackle these challenges.

## BNP AIMS TO MAKE ICT AN ECONOMIC DRIVER

BNP designates ICT as a "special priority sector" and a potential "driving force of the country's economic growth." It pledges to create a "future-oriented, dynamic and technologically inclusive Bangladesh," benefiting

citizens, students, freelancers, entrepreneurs, and businesses.

Job creation is central. BNP plans to directly generate 200,000 ICT jobs in cybersecurity, BPO (business process outsourcing), AI-data, semiconductors, and Industry 4.0, and indirectly create 800,000 more through freelancing and content creation.

The manifesto sets ambitious infrastructure targets, including reliable high-speed internet for all and

diversify exports and move up the value chain, many targets remain highly aspirational.

Currently, Bangladesh has around 300,000-400,000 ICT workers, far below the over one million tech-related jobs promised. Rural broadband is uneven, and infrastructure essential for advanced data centres and near-constant uptime is still developing.

AKM Wahiduzzaman, BNP's information and technology affairs

secretary, said the party plans a phased ICT transformation with entry to high-skill job creation, curriculum modernisation, and scalable infrastructure backed by measurable KPIs. Semiconductor and hardware development will begin with achievable clusters and phased, performance-linked investments.

JAMAAT FOCUSES ON GOVERNANCE AND ANTI-CORRUPTION

Jamaat places ICT at the centre of its economic and governance agenda, aiming for \$5 billion in exports and 2 million ICT jobs by 2030, rising to \$10 billion by 2035.

These targets mirror those of the previous Awami League government, which fell short due to skill gaps, limited high-value product development, and weak global market integration.

The manifesto offers little detail on addressing long-standing structural issues, including access to global clients, quality standards, intellectual property protection, and advanced talent development, raising questions about whether these goals represent a real departure from past failures.

Jamaat prioritises anti-corruption and citizen services. Its manifesto pledges to "completely eliminate corruption" using ICT, introduce a complaint redress system within three months, implement a single digital ID for all services, and support local tech firms under a "Bangladesh First" approach similar to BNP's.

Cybersecurity plans include a national policy, strengthening CIRT (cyber incident response team), forming an ethical hacking team, and enacting international standard laws for information confidentiality and digital rights. Telecom reforms aim to improve efficiency, reduce corruption, and ensure fair competition among operators.

Despite these initiatives, implementation challenges remain. The party's export and job targets appear overly optimistic given the current capacity limitations, including underdeveloped inter-ministerial coordination, legal frameworks, and secure databases.

BNP	JAMAAT	NCP	CPB
Aims for total 1m direct and indirect ICT jobs	Targets \$5b ICT exports & 2m jobs by 2030	Promises 1.5m digital jobs, citizen-focused services nationwide	Backs science, tech, ICT for public welfare with a six-month research policy
Promises high-speed internet, AI data centres, e-wallets, start-up support	Emphasises fight against corruption, digital IDs, citizen services, cybersecurity reforms	Plans unified digital ID, secure data infrastructure, cashless payments	

"99.999 percent network reliability" through a new Connectivity Masterplan developed with public and private sectors.

Additional pledges include introducing PayPal and a national e-wallet, building an AI-driven data centre campus, expanding start-up funds, and creating a national crowdfunding platform.

While the manifesto's focus on AI, semiconductors, and digital skills aligns with Bangladesh's goal to

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