



Charghat and Bagha in Rajshahi are known for producing turmeric powder, with many village households growing and processing the roots on a small commercial scale. Though not a mainstream crop, turmeric is widely grown by households across the country for their own year-round use. In the two northwestern upazilas, after harvest, the roots are dried, cleaned and sorted before being ground in machines. The finished powder can fetch up to Tk 8,000 per maund.

PHOTO: AZAHAR UDDIN

AI chatbots emerge as new frontier for advertisers

AFP, Paris

The introduction of advertisements and sponsored content in chatbots has spawned privacy concerns for AI users as brands scramble to stay relevant in a fast-changing online environment.

ChatGPT developer OpenAI began showing ads in chatbot conversations for free and low-cost users to start balancing its hundreds of billions in spending commitments with new revenue sources.

It swiftly came in for mockery from rival Anthropic, which has staked its reputation on safety and data security.

Anthropic's advertisement broadcast during last week's Super Bowl showed a man asking advice from a conversational AI, which then shoehorns advertising copy for a dating site into its otherwise relevant response.

OpenAI boss Sam Altman shot back that the clip was "clearly dishonest".

Beyond OpenAI, Microsoft has been running contextual ads and sponsored content in its Copilot AI assistant since 2023.

AI search engine Perplexity has been testing ads in the United States since 2024, while Google is also testing ads in the AI "overviews" its namesake search engine has been offering since last year.

Google has repeatedly denied wanting to run ads in its Gemini chatbot, with Demis Hassabis — head of the search giant's DeepMind AI arm — saying that ads "have to be handled very carefully".

"The most important thing" in AI is "trust in security and privacy, because you want to share potentially your life with that assistant," he added.

OpenAI has sought to reassure users that ChatGPT's responses will not be modified by the ads, which are shown alongside conversations rather than being integrated into them.

It has also promised not to sell user data to advertisers.

AI companies are "concerned that selling ads will scare away users," said Nate Elliott, an analyst with US data firm Emarketer.

But "when it's free, you're the product. It's a risk we're all more or less aware

of already," said Jerome Malzac of AI consultancy Micropole.

"We accept it because we find value in it."

If that proves true, advertisers will be delighted to surf the AI wave as it crashes over the world's internet users.

AI assistants could account for up to two percent of the online advertising market by 2030

"It's going to be a game changer for the entire industry," said Justin Seibert, head of Direct Online Marketing.

"We're already seeing how high the conversion rates (interactions resulting in a purchase) are for people that are coming in from ChatGPT and the other LLMs (large language models)," he added.

AI assistants could account for up to two percent of the online advertising market by 2030, HSBC bank analysts suggested in a report.

Many brands are already prioritising

visibility on the new channel, including US supermarket chain Target and software maker Adobe.

Beyond buying a spot on users' screens, companies are also pushing for their products to appear in chatbots' organic responses.

The practice is known as GEO (Generative Engine Optimisation) — an evolution of the Search Engine Optimisation strategy during the era of Google's dominance over the web.

"We identified 90 rules that can make sure the content you create is valued by AI and spread to the right places," said Joan Burkovic, head of French GEO startup GetMint.

The company already claims 100 clients, including fashion brand Lacoste.

Malzac highlighted techniques like including references to scientific papers, adding a "frequently asked questions" section to your website, and posting information that's structured and regularly updated, Malzac said.

"If your brand isn't referenced (by chatbots) it no longer exists" for some users, he warned.

Chinese tourists favour Russia, Thailand as Japan demand fades

ANN/THE NATION

Chinese tourists are expected to travel overseas in greater numbers during the upcoming Lunar New Year break, with popular destinations including Russia, Australia, Thailand and South Korea, while Japan has started to lose some of its appeal, Reuters reported.

The Lunar New Year — also known as the Spring Festival — is one of China's longest holidays. In 2026, it will run for nine days from February 15, one day longer than usual, ushering in the Year of the Horse.

Chinese authorities expect a record 9.5 billion passenger trips during the associated 40-day Spring Festival travel rush, up from 9.02 billion last year. Officials hope the longer holiday will encourage more travel both domestically and abroad.

Zhou Weihong of Shanghai-based Spring Tour, the travel arm of budget carrier Spring Airlines, said Thailand has returned to being the top outbound destination because of its warm weather while much of China remains cold.

Against an uncertain economic backdrop, the report noted that many consumers appear to be seeking a brief escape. A prolonged property downturn has eroded household wealth, while uneven post-pandemic growth has fuelled job insecurity.



PHOTO: AFP

A Chinese tourist from Beijing poses in front of the Kremlin's Spasskaya tower and St Basil's cathedral in central Moscow on February 4.

Studies cited in the report suggest Chinese consumers are placing greater priority on spending on "experiences". McKinsey has described this as a deeper shift in how China consumes.

For domestic trips, demand is split between warm-weather destinations such as Hainan and snow-focused trips such as Changbai Mountain in Jilin province in northeastern China.

Russia surges on visa waiver; Australia up more than 100%

Bookings to Russia on Spring Tour's platform have more than doubled from a year earlier, with northern Europe also seeing similar growth. Sienna Parulis-Cook of Dragon Trail Research said Chinese travel to Russia is likely to keep rising this year, helped by Moscow's move in December to waive visas for visitors from China.

Meanwhile, Trip.com Group said the recovery in long-haul outbound travel has driven the number of Chinese tourists travelling to Australia to rise by more than 100 percent from a year earlier.

Stocks jump

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For instance, Dacca Dyeing, owned by BNP leader Giasuddin Quader Chowdhury, rose 9.94 percent despite struggling for nearly a decade.

National Bank, where BNP leader Abdul Awal Mintoo has ownership, climbed 9.7 percent. The bank sits in the "Z" category, a classification usually assigned to financially weak companies.

Dhaka Bank, linked to BNP Standing Committee member Mirza Abbas, also gained 9.6 percent.

At the Dhaka bourse, all major indices advanced yesterday. The DS30, which tracks blue-chip stocks, rose 86 points, or 4.18 percent, to 2,145. The DSES, which follows shariah-based firms, added 30 points, or 2.77 percent, to 1,127.

Notably, none of the top five gainers belonged to the "A" category, generally considered financially sound. That leaves a question: are investors backing solid businesses, or simply placing bets on political proximity?

Market observers say a degree of optimism is natural after a change in government. Still, they caution against blind enthusiasm.

"If you buy a rotten apple, what will you do with that?" said Saiful

Islam, president of the DSE Brokers Association (DBA).

Itekhhar Alam, president of the Bangladesh Merchant Bankers Association, said improved governance and recent legal reforms have lifted sentiment.

He expects more quality firms to enter the market through initial public offerings (IPO).

At the same time, he acknowledged the wider economy remains under strain. Inflation is high. Foreign exchange reserves are yet to stabilise fully. Several banks are still fragile.

That suggests the rally is built more on expectation than on hard economic evidence, he commented.

Other analysts share that view. Political transitions often spark short-term surges. Without stronger corporate performance, better governance and a steady economic recovery, gains can evaporate as quickly as they appear.

The upbeat mood extended beyond Dhaka. At the Chittagong Stock Exchange, the CASPI index climbed 484 points, or 3.2 percent, to 15,518.

DBA president Islam said investors have to be very mindful in the coming days, and they should not invest in rumour-based stocks.

Teletalk to get spectrum

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When asked about Teletalk's unpaid dues, Bari acknowledged that spectrum guidelines prohibit giving spectrum to operators with outstanding payments.

However, he added that "there is an arrangement for this" and that Teletalk has received spectrum under similar arrangements before.

Teletalk currently serves about only 68 lakh users out of Bangladesh's roughly 18.6 crore mobile subscribers, approximately 3.66 percent of the market.

Teletalk currently has 55.2 MHz out of a total 396.6 MHz of spectrums allocated to the operators, accounting for around 14 percent of

total spectrum allocations.

The 700 MHz band, often described globally as the "golden spectrum", is prized for its technical advantages. As a low-frequency band, it travels longer distances, penetrates buildings more effectively and requires fewer towers to provide coverage compared to higher-frequency bands.

The advantages makes it particularly suitable for expanding coverage in rural areas, improving indoor connectivity in cities and supporting both 4G expansion and future 5G deployment.

In contrast, higher-frequency spectrum can carry more data but covers shorter distances and is more easily obstructed by physical barriers.

Broken trust: New govt faces battle

FROM PAGE B1

repeated loan scams, and related-party lending have eroded confidence, he also noted.

THE BROADER ECONOMIC MALAISE

The banking crisis is only one dimension of the economic challenges facing the new government. Inflation continues to punish ordinary Bangladeshis, particularly those with lower and middle incomes, whose purchasing power has steadily eroded.

The 12-month average inflation rate stood at 8.66 percent in January, far above the Bangladesh Bank's target of bringing it below 7 percent, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS).

Despite an aggressive monetary tightening campaign that raised the policy rate from 6 percent to 10 percent over three years, price pressures have refused to yield.

"People's purchasing power has decreased due to high inflation, and that inflationary pressure must be cooled down by any means," said Syed Mahbubur Rahman, managing director and CEO of Mutual Trust Bank (MTB) and former ABB chairman.

Speaking about other challenges for the next government, he noted that businesses face prohibitively expensive borrowing costs while consumers cut back on spending.

This has contributed to the weak growth that Moody's recently highlighted when warning that Bangladesh's banking sector faces mounting strains from economic headwinds and political uncertainty.

Meanwhile, Rahman also noted that foreign debt servicing costs continue to climb, rising 17 percent to \$7.09 billion at the end of June last fiscal year.

Add to this a chronically low tax-to-GDP ratio, energy security concerns, and the need for judicial reforms in the financial sector, and the scale of the challenge becomes clear, the senior banker pointed out.

EXPERT PRESCRIPTIONS
Economists and banking leaders

agree that addressing Bangladesh's financial crisis will require more than superficial fixes. The new government must pursue fundamental reforms, and do so for the right reasons.

"These reform initiatives must be undertaken for the sake of improving financial health, not for political reasons," CPD's Mustafizur Rahman emphasised.

He called for continuing and deepening reforms initiated by the interim administration: merging weak banks and non-bank financial institutions, restructuring boards, and amending the Bank Company Act and the Bangladesh Bank Order.

Allowing financial institutions, including the central bank, to operate independently will be critical to success, he stressed.

City Bank's Arefin laid out a three-part reform agenda.

First, governance must be the priority. "Reform must focus on two words: Governance First," he said.

"Enforce 'fit and proper' tests for bank directors and CEOs, tighten beneficial ownership disclosure, revisit director tenure and debunk the family definition myth, and then align the Bank Company Act with Basel Core Principles," he added.

Second, he said the capital and resolution crisis demands immediate attention. System-wide capital has fallen to dangerous levels, creating hidden solvency problems and forcing repeated recapitalisation attempts.

"The priority is an independent asset quality review followed by a time-bound recapitalisation plan, limited to banks that accept strict restructuring conditions such as write-offs, governance reforms, and recovery targets," Arefin said.

Third, state-owned banks require consolidation and governance overhauls to stop the fiscal bleeding and restore discipline. Any mergers must be tied to accountability and staffed by professional boards, not political appointees.

Finally, Arefin stressed the need for institutional alignment. "Monetary policy and financial stability must be aligned through

clear communication and operational independence. Stronger enforcement, faster insolvency processes, better credit data, and transparent reporting are essential to rebuild trust and predictability."

CPD's Mustafizur Rahman added that the current tight monetary policy, while aimed at controlling inflation, is strangling investment.

"It will be very difficult to boost investment while keeping the cost of funds so high," he said.

Talking to the Daily Star, Birupaksha Paul, professor of economics at the State University of New York in Cortland, US, said that a developing country like Bangladesh always faces challenges in the financial sector. However, the interim government has added fuel to the fire, as during its tenure, the law-and-order situation worsened to a new low.

"The BNP government must fix that first before paying any attention to the financial sector," he said, adding that the wounds in the financial sector mainly include the falling index in the capital market, the rising volume of default loans, and most notably the rising public borrowing from the banking sector.

"Without making a new separate ministry for revenue, which would have been a proper step, the interim government broke NBR in two to increase revenue, which acted like a boomerang for public finance," he noted.

"The new government's toughest challenge will be revenue mobilisation, without which implementing the pay-scale will be suicidal," the economist said, noting that the interim government raised the issue of pay-scale rather untimely, and it will act as a landmine for the new government.

Behind the statistics and policy prescriptions are people like Faruk Hasan, whose lives hang in the balance. His Tk 80 lakh represents decades of work and sacrifice, now locked away in an institution that may never return it. His need for medication is immediate;

the bureaucratic and financial machinery's response is anything but.

"Rebuilding trust in the financial sector, especially in banks and financial institutions, is one of the major challenges for the new government," Hasan observed.

Imported goods

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Protein-based products remained the largest contributor, accounting for 62.8 percent of overall food inflation in the October-December quarter.

Cereals accounted for 1.4 percent of food inflation, while vegetables' contribution dropped by 13.38 percent compared to the previous quarter.

The share of perishable goods fell to 32.8 percent in the October-December quarter from 34.1 percent in the first quarter, while non-perishable goods' share rose to 48.9 percent from 46.7 percent, reflecting slight price pressures.

Services contributed 18.3 percent to inflation in the second quarter, down from 19.2 percent in the July-September period a year ago.

Vietnam licenses Starlink

AFP, Hanoi

Vietnam has granted a licence to Elon Musk's Starlink to operate its satellite internet services in the communist country, a government agency said.

The radio frequency regulator said local unit Starlink Services Vietnam Co. can initially deploy four gateway stations and a maximum of 600,000 terminal devices in Vietnam.

The licensing requires Starlink to ensure "no interference with existing radio communication networks", the Radio Frequency Management authority announced on Saturday.

The Starlink system would contribute to "expanding satellite internet connectivity" in the country, it added.