



Rehan Asad

Govt to focus on ICT as foundation for future growth

PM's telecom and ICT Adviser Rehan Asad tells The Daily Star

MAHMUDUL HASAN

From economic growth to artificial intelligence adoption, the new government views telecom and ICT as the foundation for Bangladesh's development over the next three decades, according to Prime Minister's Adviser Rehan Asad.

In his first interview after assuming office as adviser to the prime minister for telecom and ICT, Asad outlined an ambitious agenda focused on connectivity, investment, digital sovereignty, and rapid implementation.

"ICT and telecom are foundational thrust sectors in our manifesto. If we build the foundation right, it will support the country's progress for the next 10, 20, even 30 years," he told The Daily Star.

"We are committed to working with everyone—mobile operators, broadband providers, fibre companies, software firms, journalists, and independent experts," he said.

"We want to move forward based on informed consensus."

The adviser's own career reflects a blend of engineering, global policy, and corporate leadership.

Born and raised in Rajshahi, he completed his schooling there before pursuing higher studies abroad in telecommunications and communication engineering. He later earned an MBA from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, US.

"Over the past 22 years, about two-thirds of my career has been in technology, and one-third in foreign policy and humanitarian work."

His international experience includes senior roles in global organisations, including serving as chief of staff at the World Food Programme, where he worked on humanitarian operations, as well as advisory roles in foreign policy.

Before returning to Bangladesh, he was vice president of global operations at Expedia Group.

CONNECTIVITY AS ECONOMIC BEDROCK

According to Asad, no country can achieve technological advancement without robust connectivity.

"The bedrock of technological progress is network connectivity," he said. "Research worldwide shows that better speed and reliability directly correlate with higher GDP growth."

He traced the evolution of internet infrastructure—from copper telephone lines and dial-up connections to DSL, mobile broadband, and fibre—to illustrate how foundational networks shape digital ecosystems.

Bangladesh, however, lags significantly in fixed broadband fibre deployment.

"If you look at neighbouring or comparable countries, our fibre penetration—especially to homes and offices—is still low," he said. "Even in affluent areas of Dhaka, fibre may reach buildings, but speeds remain

inconsistent."

For him, ubiquitous high-speed connectivity is the central challenge.

Despite the ambitious goals, the adviser says his immediate priority is understanding the current situation before announcing sweeping reforms.

"In the first seven days, I focused on learning—meeting officials from the ministry, regulators, operators, and private sector stakeholders," he said. "Before planning the future, you must understand where you are and why."

He indicated that decisions on whether to prioritise fibre, mobile broadband, or satellite connectivity may vary by region.

"In some areas, fibre may be economical. In others, mobile broadband or even satellite may be better," he explained.

FREE HIGH-SPEED WI-FI AT TRANSPORT HUBS

One of the first initiatives of the government aims to dramatically improve connectivity at major transit

Connectivity
Build robust telecom infrastructure
Offer free Wi-Fi at airports, railway stations

Policy reform
Review telecom and ICT policies

Strengthen cybersecurity

Economic impact
Restore investor confidence

Future tech
Deploy AI across government services

Governance
Prioritise execution over rhetoric

points.

"We plan to deploy high-capacity, reliable Wi-Fi at airports and major railway stations before Eid," he said.

The project will begin with the country's three international airports—Dhaka, Chattogram, and Sylhet—before expanding nationwide.

"If you go to Dhaka airport today, multiple providers offer Wi-Fi, but users struggle to log in or get usable speed," he said.

"During peak hours, up to 70,000 passengers pass through the airport," he said.

"We are designing the network assuming that 50-80 percent of them may connect simultaneously."

The service will be free but financially sustainable through advertising.

Asked about what the government would do regarding the telecom and ICT policy reforms introduced by the interim government, Asad said that these would undergo a comprehensive review.

"Our manifesto clearly states that the telecommunications network and licensing policies adopted in 2025 will be fully reviewed," he said. "Positive

elements will be retained, while controversial aspects will be reassessed."

One pressing issue is the widespread use of illegal or counterfeit mobile devices.

"This is not just an economic issue—it is a national security concern," he warned. "If a criminal clones your phone's identity, you or your family could face serious consequences."

He said major global manufacturers are interested in investing locally but demand stronger enforcement.

"They all say the same thing: stop illegal phones, and we will invest," he said.

The government plans public awareness campaigns to explain the benefits of regulation.

TELECOM AS CRITICAL NATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

The adviser said his vision is to redefine telecom networks as national assets rather than merely a revenue source.

"Telecommunications should

readiness."

When asked how he would navigate the challenges stemming from digital trade rules embedded in Bangladesh's new agreement with the US—rules that many experts fear could deprive Bangladesh of tax revenues and potentially limit the expansion of its digital economy—he said he believes these concerns will not pose any real obstacle.

PREPARING FOR THE AI ERA

The adviser sees artificial intelligence as the next major technological shift—one that Bangladesh must embrace quickly.

Asked how BNP would fulfil its manifesto pledge to directly create 200,000 ICT jobs and indirectly 800,000 more despite AI-driven job cuts, he said the government has begun identifying challenges of freelancers and people working in the digital economy and will be facilitating easier payment access, regulatory support, and improved availability of essential

digital tools and platforms.

"I would like children from primary school onward to start learning AI concepts," he said. "It should not be seen as rocket science—it is becoming a basic tool."

He also called for practical AI deployment across government services. Throughout the interview, the adviser repeatedly stressed execution over rhetoric.

"Policy without implementation does not change anything," he said. "Successful countries design policies, implement them, measure outcomes, and correct course."

He cited international examples where governments link policy goals directly to measurable outputs in sectors such as healthcare, education, and urban development.

"Ultimately, citizens judge us not by documents but by results," he said.

Asad said one of the main goals is nothing less than preparing the nation for the next generation of digital development.

"This is not about five years," he said. "It is about building the base for the next 30 years."

be treated like highways," he said.

"Without a strong road network, trade cannot move. Without robust digital connectivity, the economy cannot grow."

"Whether someone lives in Dhaka, Khulna, Rajshahi, or Teknaf, they should have comparable connectivity," he stressed. Cybersecurity and data protection are equally vital.

"Connectivity without security is dangerous," he warned. "We must protect national data, personal information, and digital sovereignty."

Foreign direct investment in telecom and ICT has declined in recent years, partly due to slowing revenue growth and market uncertainties.

"FDI is critical for Bangladesh at this stage," Asad said. "In many countries, ICT contributes 8-10 percent of GDP. In Bangladesh, estimates range from less than 1 percent to about 1.5 percent."

Investors now evaluate digital readiness differently.

"Twenty years ago, mobile penetration mattered. Ten years ago, data penetration mattered. Today, investors want fast, reliable broadband, advanced networks, and future

Working through Ramadan

PARVEZ MURSHED

When I left Bangladesh to start a regional role at a global bank based in Singapore, one of the biggest cultural differences at work became clear during the month of Ramadan. As I began fasting, I soon realised there was an ecosystem of support in my office in Bangladesh that was missing at the regional headquarters of the global bank.

In Bangladesh, office hours are shorter during Ramadan, and most colleagues who are fasting share the same state of mind, creating an environment of empathy. I recall my very first Ramadan in Singapore when I joined a global call in the evening. Most global calls took place then to allow participation from all regions. As iftar time approached, my global boss asked me to provide an update on Asia. I took a sip of water, broke my fast and began the update. It was not the ideal way to end a long day of fasting in the office.

Yet I always felt fortunate. I was working in an air-conditioned office while workers from Bangladesh were enduring extreme heat on construction sites, many of them also fasting.

Over the years, I have had many kind bosses. Some allowed me to work from home during Ramadan and blocked my calendar during Friday prayer time. I was also delighted to find a dedicated prayer room and a separate halal microwave oven in the pantry when I later joined a fintech company in Singapore. At the bank, finding a place to pray was often a struggle. There was no prayer room, and I had to search for an available meeting room during prayer times.

Ramadan also teaches important lessons about work prioritisation. I learned to focus on the most important strategic work in the morning when energy levels were higher and the mind was fully alert.

This discipline can be practised throughout the year but becomes especially important during Ramadan. A shorter working day means you must complete tasks in the most productive and effective way.

You also learn to avoid confrontations at work, which can easily arise when sugar levels are low.

Traffic management in Dhaka, particularly the race to reach home before iftar, also teaches discipline and time management. I developed the habit of breaking my fast with water and dates in the office and then leaving quickly for home on almost empty streets to have a proper iftar with family. Many years have passed, yet the streets of Dhaka still fall silent just before iftar and fill again soon after.

One privilege in many Bangladesh offices is the service of office peons who fetch tea and run errands. You do not have that in most overseas offices. I realised how much I missed them while making my own tea and learning how to operate the photocopy machine.

When I first started working in Dhaka after returning from the United States, I was not in the habit of fasting. I noticed our office peons were fasting and felt uncomfortable asking them to make me tea during Ramadan. So, I began making my own tea. The peons rushed over as if I was doing something forbidden. To avoid the awkwardness, I decided the best solution was to start fasting myself.

Over the years, fasting has taught me valuable lessons about patience, discipline and effectiveness. It also deepened my respect for colleagues from different backgrounds. Whether working in an office in Motijheel, later in Gulshan Avenue in Dhaka, or from one of the skyscrapers in the central business district of Singapore managing Asia through a regional lens, the practice of fasting helped me navigate complex professional challenges. My faith and the discipline of Ramadan ultimately became a quiet source of strength throughout my career.

The writer is a senior banking consultant

Trump has limited options to curb war-driven oil price surge

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump is under pressure to curb oil prices sent skyrocketing by the war with Iran, but has only limited tools to fix a problem that is shaking the world economy and is politically toxic at home.

Trump has insisted it will be only a "short-term" issue that will end when the war ends, yet soaring gas prices are already hitting voters ahead of US midterm elections later this year in which the economy will be crucial.

"The White House is in constant coordination with the relevant agencies on this important issue, as it is a top priority to the president," White House spokeswoman Taylor Rogers said in a statement to AFP.

"President Trump and his entire energy team have had a strong game plan to keep the energy markets stable well before 'Operation Epic Fury' began, and they will continue to review all credible options."

STRAIT OF HORMUZ

The key driver of the spike in oil prices is the virtual halt in sea traffic through the Strait of Hormuz—a key Gulf waterway through which a fifth of global crude passes—since the war broke out on February 28.

Trump said last week that the US Navy was ready to escort tankers through the strait "if necessary" and ordered the United States to

provide insurance for commercial shipping. There has however been no sign yet of such US escorts.

And while French President Emmanuel Macron said Monday that France and its allies are already preparing a "defensive" mission to reopen the strait, he added that it would only happen "after the end of the hottest phase of the conflict."

STRATEGIC RESERVES

One major option under consideration around the world is tapping into strategic oil reserves—but it is one Trump played down at the weekend.

"We've got a lot of oil, our country has a tremendous amount," Trump told reporters aboard Air Force One on Saturday. "That'll get healed very quickly."

Trump has somewhat replenished the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve, which now has 415 million barrels, enough to fill up more than 600 million cars once the oil is refined. The US government has made four major oil withdrawals in recent history: at the end of the first Gulf War, after Hurricane Katrina, after the Libyan revolution, and during Joe Biden's presidency.

But it could have a limited effect.

"A release of the SPR can help mitigate some of the supply disruption, but it's clearly not enough to overcome the loss of

20 million barrels a day of oil through the Strait of Hormuz," Andy Lipow of Lipow Oil Associates told AFP.

The G7 group of industrialized nations meanwhile is "not there yet" in terms of any release of strategic oil reserves, France's

finance minister said Monday.

SANCTIONS RELAXATION

The United States last week said it was considering lifting sanctions on more Russian oil, a day after temporarily allowing India to buy from Moscow—a move that could

ultimately fund Russia's war on Ukraine.

Trump on Saturday said he would be prepared to take similar measures in the future "just to take a little of the pressure off, the oil pressure." But all of the above options risk having a limited effect.

"It seems as though the Trump administration may not have fully appreciated the cause and effect related to the initiation of this war in this region that's so vital for the global economy," Clayton Seigle, senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, told AFP.

VENEZUELA OPTION

In the longer-term, speculation has swirled about whether Trump will seek to take control of Iran's oil, as the United States did after the military operation that toppled Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro in January.

The US president has boasted that 80 million barrels of Venezuelan crude has been shipped to the United States under a deal with the new leadership in Caracas.

But Trump says it's too early to talk about, with the war still raging and Iran's clerical establishment just picking Ayatollah Mojtaba Khamenei to replace his slain father as supreme leader.

"You look at Venezuela," Trump told NBC News on Monday. "People have thought about it, but it's too soon to talk about that."



US President Donald Trump speaks during a press conference at Trump National Doral in Miami, Florida on March 9.

PHOTO: AFP