Star BUSINESS

Trade deficit widens 17.4% in July-January

Balance of payments swings to $2.28b surplus

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Bangladesh's trade deficit, the gap between what it buys and sells abroad, widened by 17.44 percent in the July-January period of fiscal year 2025-26, due mainly to higher imports and weaker export earnings.

The deficit reached $13.79 billion during the seven months, up from $11.74 billion in the same period a year earlier.

According to Bangladesh Bank (BB) data, import bills rose 4.6 percent year-on-year to $39.88 billion. Export earnings, meanwhile, slipped 1.1 percent to $26.09 billion.

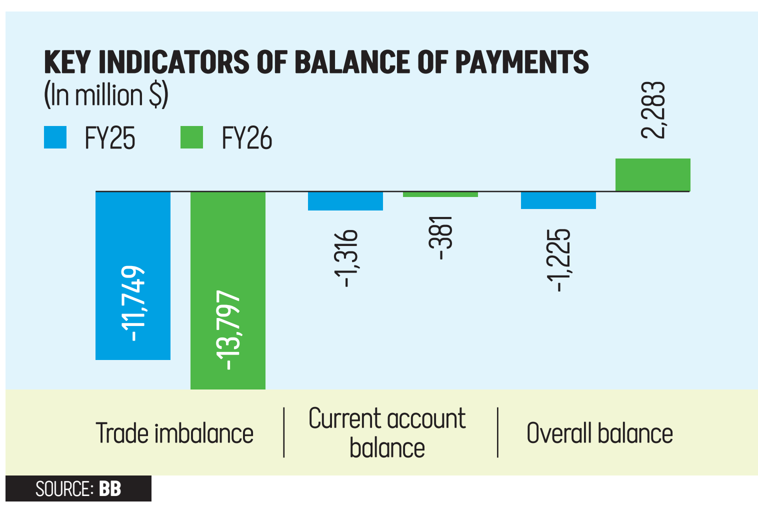
The widening gap has raised concerns at a time when the US-Israel war on Iran has rattled global oil markets and disrupted shipping routes. Since tensions escalated in the Middle East, the Bangladeshi currency, the taka, has begun to weaken. A softer currency could raise import costs and place further strain on the trade balance.

At the same time, exports have not shown clear growth, while war-driven inflation may reduce demand in Bangladesh's major export markets.

Despite the wider trade gap, the country's current account deficit narrowed.

This measure, which tracks the net flow of money in and out of the country through trade in goods and services as well as income flows, stood at $381 million in July-January of FY26. A year earlier, it was $1.31 billion.

The financial account also strengthened during the period.



Supported by higher net foreign direct investment, the surplus in the account, which records cross-border flows from investment, loans, aid and other financial transactions, climbed to $2 billion from $331 million a year earlier.

Taken together, the changes pushed Bangladesh's overall balance of payments (BoP) into a surplus of $2.28 billion. In the same period last year, the country posted a deficit of $1.22 billion.

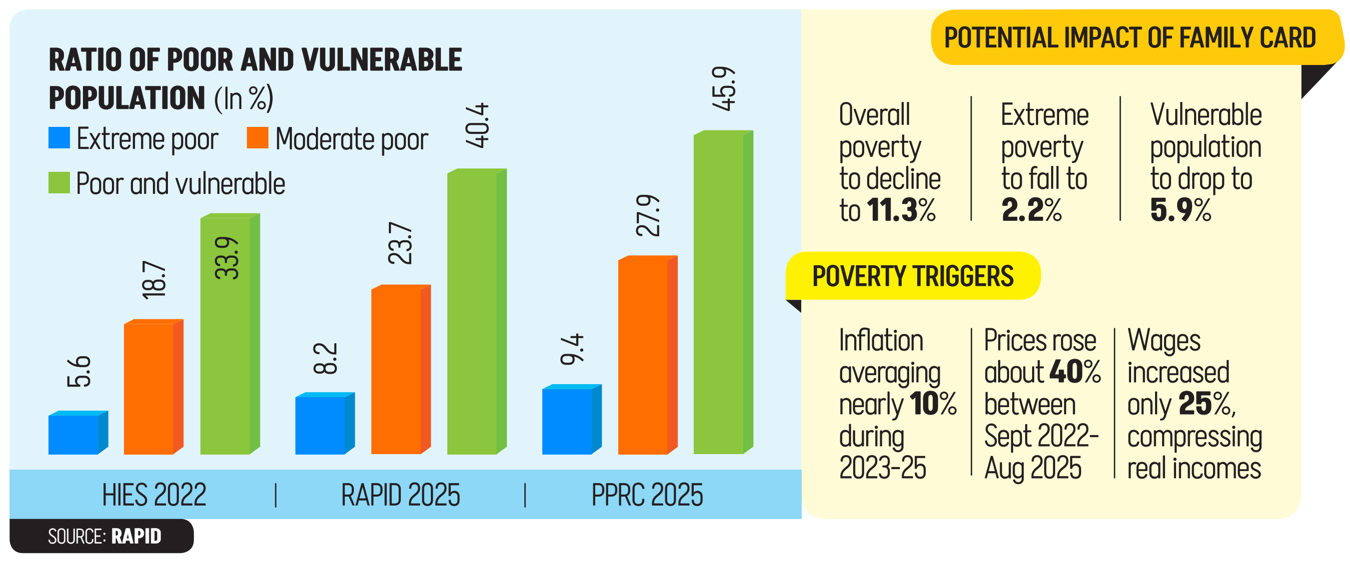
In an article, Sadiq Ahmed, vice chairman of the Policy Research Institute of Bangladesh (PRI), said the fall in exports has raised concerns about the country's BoP outlook.

He added that strong remittance inflows have provided a key support. Remittance earnings rose sharply, bringing in $9 billion more in FY2025 than in FY2022.

READ MORE ON B3

Family cards could reduce poverty to 11.3%

Finds new study, says impact will depend on accurate targeting and transparent beneficiary selection



STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The government's "Family Card" programme, which will provide Tk 2,500 a month to poor and vulnerable households, could reduce the country's poverty rate by more than 7 percentage points if carried out effectively, according to a new study.

"If the allowance is extended to all poor and vulnerable families, overall poverty would decline from 18.7 percent to 11.3 percent, a 7.4 percentage-point reduction," said the study.

Extreme poverty would also fall sharply, from 5.6 percent to 2.2 percent, a drop of 3.4 percentage points.

The study was conducted by local think tank Research and Policy Integration for Development (RAPID) and presented at an event in Dhaka yesterday by RAPID Chairman MA Razzaque.

The study suggested the programme would have a particularly strong effect among poor and vulnerable groups. Poverty in this segment could fall from 33.9 percent to 15.5 percent, an 8.4 percentage-point decline, RAPID said.

Under the Family Card initiative, the allowance will be transferred according to the beneficiary's preference, either through a mobile wallet or a bank account, allowing them to receive the support from home.

The government inaugurated the pilot phase of the programme on Tuesday. At least 40,000 families will receive benefits during the four-month trial.

In absolute terms, the programme could lift around 1.23 crore people out of poverty, reduce the number of extremely poor by 56 lakh and help 1.56 crore people move out of economic vulnerability, according to RAPID.

"The effectiveness of the Family Card programme will depend heavily on accurate targeting and transparent beneficiary selection," Razzaque said.

To minimise exclusion errors, where eligible households are left out, and inclusion errors, where non-poor households receive benefits, the selection process should follow a transparent and data-based approach, he said.

Razzaque said spending on social protection can be politically popular for any government.

He, however, warned about the government's fiscal space as it has committed to spending 3 percent of GDP on social protection.

The government's ultimate objective is to gradually bring 2 crore families under the monthly cash support, as per the Family Card Piloting Implementation Guideline, 2026.

Once fully rolled out, the programme, a key election pledge of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), would cost about Tk 5,000 crore a month, or roughly Tk 60,000 crore a year.

"In a country where the tax-to-GDP ratio remains below 7 percent, expanding such spending inevitably creates significant fiscal pressure," said Razzaque.

To address this, he suggested that overlapping or redundant safety-net programmes could be gradually phased out, with the savings redirected to finance family cards.

Still, he said, a stronger political commitment could help create additional fiscal space over time. Better design and tighter targeting of existing resources would also improve the quality and impact of public spending.

"If implemented properly, these reforms could provide a strong boost to Bangladesh's social protection agenda."

He argued that expanding the programme would have manageable fiscal implications, with administrative capacity rather than macroeconomic constraints likely to pose the main challenge.

If extended to 2 crore households, the scheme would cost about 0.96 percent of GDP, raising total social protection spending to around 2.16 percent, still below the government's target of 3 percent by 2028.

If limited to poor and vulnerable households, the cost would fall to about 0.57 percent of GDP. That would keep total spending near 1.77 percent, leaving room for other safety-net programmes.

Razzaque also said family cards should be integrated into Bangladesh's wider social protection framework rather than run as a separate initiative.

At the event, Shah Mohammad Mahboob, director general of the Department of Social Services under the Social Welfare Ministry, said the government has a strong political commitment, which is helping them to run the programme smoothly.

"The Tk 2,500 is not just a financial transfer; it also represents trust. People feel that the government is standing beside them," he said.

Mohammad Abu Yusuf, secretary of the social welfare ministry, said implementing the programme involved several coordination challenges.

"But there is no political bias in the selection process. We are doing it under a scientific system," he added.

Fuel panic buying slashes ride-sharing income

MAHMUDUL HASAN

US-Israel's war on Iran has rattled global energy markets, and gig workers such as ride-sharing bikers and car drivers in Dhaka are feeling the strain on the streets.

For them, long queues at petrol pumps and limits on fuel purchases are cutting into daily earnings. Over the past week, motorists across the capital have been waiting for hours at filling stations amid fears that the war could choke oil supplies to Bangladesh.

Authorities, however, say the country has adequate reserves. Even so, panic buying has spread, and temporary rationing has followed.

Ramadan has made the situation tougher. Working hours are already shorter during the month of fasting, so time lost in a fuel queue can mean most of the day disappears.

Mustafa Kamal, a bike driver from the northern district of Dinajpur who now lives at Mohammadpur in the capital, said the queues have started eating into his work hours.

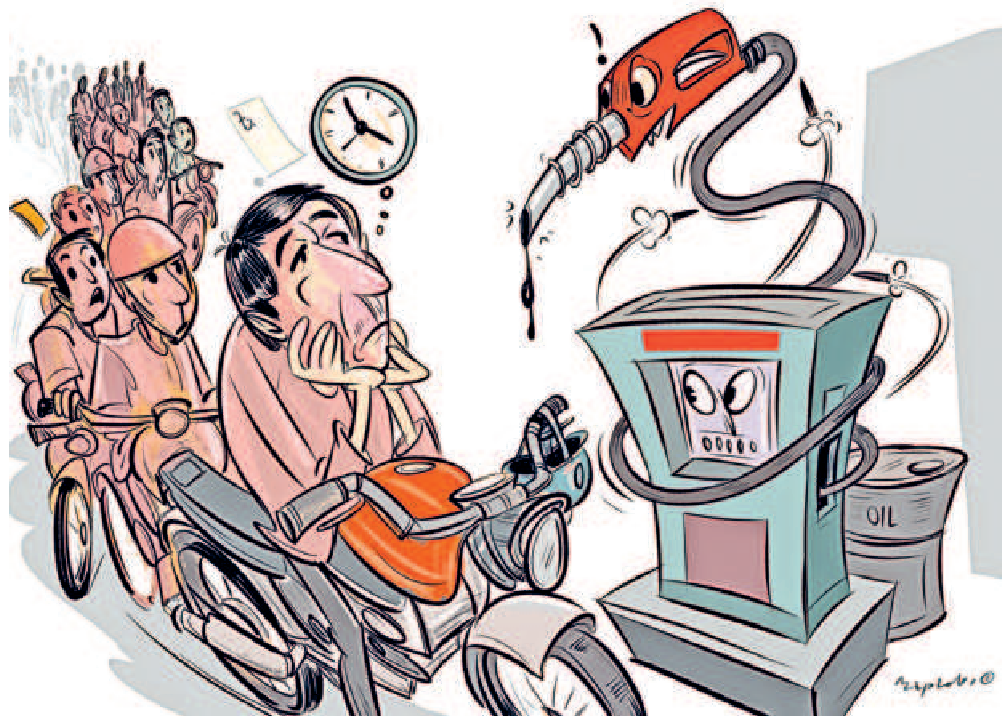
"Normally, I need five to ten minutes to get diesel," he said. "But yesterday it took over 30 minutes because there was a long queue."

Kamal considers himself fortunate. He said many drivers wait far longer as refuelling pump staffers are limiting sales to two litres per customer.

He does not use ride-sharing apps and instead picks up passengers directly from the roadside. He has not yet suffered a major financial blow, but fewer refuels mean fewer trips.

"If I can take five litres, it is manageable," said Kamal. "But when pumps allow only two litres, it becomes difficult because I have to come back again and stand in line."

Over the years, ride-sharing bikers in Dhaka have complained that their earnings are shrinking as the number of motorbikes on the road rises and competition intensifies. Demand has taken another hit in the past two years as battery-run rickshaws have spread rapidly across the city.



Against this backdrop, fuel rationing has emerged as the latest blow.

Shamsul Islam, another ride-sharing biker, said he spent nearly three hours waiting for fuel on Friday last week and only got Tk 200-worth of fuel.

Even on a relatively better day in the past week, he added, the wait can still stretch to about an hour.

"Before this crisis, I could earn up to Tk 1,200 on a good day; now it has come down to Tk 800. The time spent in queues is reducing the number of trips," said Islam.

He hopes the rush ahead of Eid al-Fitr will help recover some of those losses, as people move around the city for shopping and family visits. "But if I cannot get adequate fuel, the travel rush, one of the most profitable times for us, will also bring no benefit."

The disruption hit some riders out of nowhere.

Biker Hridoy Bala said he first heard about the problem on social media on Thursday last week. That evening, around 8 pm, he went to a petrol pump and was told there was no oil.

READ MORE ON B3

BSEC steps in amid turmoil at Navana Pharma

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission (BSEC) has ordered an investigation into allegations that the board of Navana Pharmaceuticals was forcefully taken over during a contentious meeting in January by several individuals, including sponsor shareholder Sayeed Ahmed.

BSEC formed a four-member investigation committee on Sunday with a seven-day deadline for submitting its report, and ordered a halt to implementation of decisions, including several high-profile appointments, made at that meeting until the probe concludes.

The dispute centres on a January 29 board meeting, which, according to a company disclosure, elected Javed Kaiser Ally as chairman, appointed Sayeed Ahmed as managing director, and named Md Aminul Hoque Bhuiyan as acting company secretary.

Saiqa Mazed, the company's independent director who was appointed chairman in 2025, alleged in a complaint to the BSEC on the same day that none of these appointments was on the meeting agenda, nor were they discussed or voted on.

She also alleged that Ahmed allowed Anisuzzaman Chowdhury, brother of former land minister Saifuzzaman Chowdhury, and several other individuals who had resigned from the board after August 5, 2024, to join the hybrid meeting via Zoom without board approval.

"As chairman of the board, I requested them to exit the meeting. I ordered the IT team to exclude them. However, Ahmed asked the IT team not to pay heed to me and forced me to make him MD," she said in the application to the market regulator.

Under threat, she and other independent directors exited the board meeting, Mazed wrote.

Anisuzzaman holds 3.74 percent of Navana Pharma's shares. His inclusion as a director appeared on the company website following the meeting, but was not mentioned in the January 29 disclosure.

READ MORE ON B3

USDA cuts Bangladesh's cotton import forecast

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has lowered its projection for Bangladesh's cotton imports, citing reduced domestic use of the key raw material for the textile industry.

The US agency said imports of cotton by Bangladesh, the world's second-largest apparel exporter, would be 79 lakh bales in the August-July period of the marketing year (MY) 2025-26, down from its projection of 80 lakh bales forecast last month.

The country will use 80 lakh bales of cotton in MY26, down from the USDA's previous estimate of 81 lakh bales for the year, according to the agency's report on world cotton markets and trade published on Monday.

The downward revision comes at a time when Bangladesh has registered a decline in garment exports. The country, which brings more than 80 percent of its annual export earnings through apparel, recorded a 3.73 percent year-on-year drop in shipments to $25.79 billion in the July-February period of the fiscal year (FY) 2025-26.

Of that, knitwear exports fell 4.5 percent to $14.34 billion, while woven garment shipments dropped nearly 3 percent to $12.45 billion during the same period.

Mohiuddin Rubel, additional managing director of Denim Expert Ltd, said several interconnected factors are behind the USDA's recent downgrade of Bangladesh's cotton import and consumption projections, primarily originating from sluggish retail demand in key EU and US markets.

READ MORE ON B3

Investment, digital finance fair to begin in Washington on April 17

STAR BUSINESS DESK

The International Investment and Digital Finance Fair 2026 is scheduled to begin in Washington, DC, the United States, on April 17.

The two-day exhibition is being organised by In Search of Root Foundation (ISORF), a US-based non-profit organisation.

Alongside the fair, several seminars, dialogues and investment-related discussion sessions will be held, according to a press release.

The event is expected to be attended by elected representatives from the United States, representatives of the Federal Reserve, members of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and senior officials from the US Department of State, according to a press release.

Representatives of the Senate Subcommittee on International Operations and Bilateral International Development, officials from the Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR), high-level officials from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and investors from different countries are also expected to attend.

The non-profit organisation expressed its appreciation to the government of Bangladesh and Bangladesh Bank for their investment-friendly initiatives, saying such policies would boost the confidence of international investors and encourage higher inflows of foreign investment into Bangladesh.

One of the key seminars at the fair will be titled "Strengthening Investment Flows in the US and South Asia: Challenges and Way Forward", focusing on investment opportunities, prospects and challenges in South Asia, including Bangladesh.

The foundation operates under the guidance of an advisory panel that includes Ambassador Osman Siddique, and Faisal M Rahman, professor and founding dean of The Graham School of Management at Saint Xavier University in Chicago.

PHOTO: PRIME BANK

Shahadat Hossain Bahar, chief executive officer of Best Western Plus Bay Hills, and Mamur Ahmed, senior executive vice-president and head of distribution at Prime Bank PLC, pose for a photograph after signing the agreement at Prime Aspire in Dhaka recently.

Prime Bank clients to enjoy privileges at Best Western Plus Bay Hills

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Prime Bank PLC has recently signed a strategic agreement with Best Western Plus Bay Hills, a hotel in Cox's Bazar, aimed at enhancing lifestyle and hospitality benefits for Prime Bank cardholders and employees.

Under the agreement, all Prime Bank credit and debit cardholders, along with the bank's employees, will enjoy attractive benefits at Best Western Plus Bay Hills.

These privileges include a 40 percent discount on accommodation from the rack rate, a 10 percent discount on à la carte dining at the hotel's restaurant, and a 50 percent discount on meeting and banquet hall bookings from the rack rate.

The partnership is designed to provide premium hospitality experiences at special rates for Prime Bank's stakeholders.

Mamur Ahmed, senior executive vice-president and head of distribution at Prime Bank PLC, and Shahadat Hossain Bahar, chief executive officer (CEO) of Best Western Plus Bay Hills, signed the agreement at Prime Aspire in Dhaka, according to a press release.

This collaboration reflects Prime Bank's continued commitment to delivering enhanced benefits and exclusive lifestyle privileges to its customers and employees through strategic partnerships, the release added.

Joarder Tanvir Faisal, executive vice-president and head of cards and retail assets of the bank, and Md Abu Scheir Ferdous, head of sales and marketing at the hotel, along with senior officials from both organisations, were also present at the ceremony.

Maldivian resumes Male-Dhaka-Male flights ahead of Eid travel rush

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Maldivian, the national carrier of the Maldives, resumed its Male-Dhaka-Male service yesterday with a ceremonial greeting at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (HSIA), reinstating direct connectivity between the two South Asian neighbours ahead of the Eid travel rush.

The inaugural flight, operated by an Airbus A320 carrying a full passenger load, landed at HSIA at 5:20am and departed for Male at 6:20am.

Initially, the airline will operate the route twice weekly, on Sundays and Thursdays, with return fares starting from $399 (approximately Tk 47,880).

Passengers will enjoy a 30-kilogramme baggage allowance and complimentary onboard meals. Tickets are available via Maldivian's official website, mobile app and call centre (1671).

Mohamed Ibrahim Yasir, managing director of Maldivian, and Ahmed Yusuf Walid, president and CEO of Galaxy Bangladesh Group, signed the agreement following the resumption on February 23.

Shiuneen Rasheed, the ambassador of the Maldives to Bangladesh; Ahmed Ibrahim, director of ground operations at the airline; and Mohamed Salah, general manager (international commercial), attended the launching ceremony.

The timing of the service's return coincides with the Ramadan and Eid-ul-Fitr travel season, facilitating travel for Bangladeshi expatriates returning home and Maldivian visitors heading abroad.

Robi's Ziad Shatara elected AMTOB president

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Ziad Shatara

Ziad Shatara, managing director and chief executive officer (CEO) of Robi Axiata PLC, has been elected as the president of the Association of Mobile Telecom Operators of Bangladesh (AMTOB).

His election took place at AMTOB's annual general meeting (AGM), held virtually on March 11, the association said in a statement yesterday.

Shatara succeeds Yasir Azman, CEO of Grameenphone, and will serve a two-year term beginning on April 1.

The newly formed AMTOB board also announced the appointment of Johan Buse, CEO of Banglalink, as senior vice-president; Yasir Azman as vice-president; and Nurul Mabud Chowdhury, managing director of Teletalk, as a director.

Abdus Salam, country manager of Ericsson Bangladesh; Jason Wu, CEO of Huawei Technologies (Bangladesh); Taimur Rahman, chief corporate and regulatory affairs officer of Banglalink; Tanveer Mohammad, chief corporate affairs officer of Grameenphone; Shahed Alam, chief corporate and regulatory officer of Robi Axiata; and Luthfullahil Mozid, deputy general manager of Teletalk, participated in the AGM.

Lieutenant Colonel (retd) Mohammad Zulfikar, secretary general of AMTOB, moderated the session.

Goldman Sachs raises crude price forecast

REUTERS

Goldman Sachs raised its Brent, WTI crude oil price forecasts for the fourth quarter of 2026 to $71/67 per barrel from $66/62 as it sees longer disruption to oil flows in the Strait of Hormuz due to the US-Israeli war on Iran.

Brent prices have gained more than 36 percent since the war began on February 28, while WTI has risen about 39 percent. Both benchmarks briefly topped $119 on Monday, their highest levels since mid-2022.

The fighting has effectively shut the Strait of Hormuz, leaving tankers stranded for more than a week and forcing producers to suspend output as storage nears capacity.

Midland Bank, Nagad join hands to speed up remittance delivery

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Nagad Limited has entered into a partnership agreement with Midland Bank PLC to streamline the delivery of expatriate remittances to Bangladesh's grassroots, enabling faster and more secure digital transfers nationwide.

Under the partnership, remittances sent by Bangladeshi expatriates will be credited directly to beneficiaries' Nagad mobile wallets through Midland Bank, using authorised channels including international exchange houses, money transfer operators and banks.

Recipients will have 24/7 access to their funds through Nagad accounts, regardless of location, including remote and rural areas.

Imtiaz Uddin Ahmed, managing director and CEO of Midland Bank PLC, and Md Motasem Billah, administrator of Nagad Limited, signed the agreement at the bank's head office in Gulshan, Dhaka recently, according to a press release.

Ahmed said, "Midland Bank collects remittances through an extensive global partner network. This agreement with Nagad will deliver faster and more convenient remittance services to expatriates and their families."

Billah said, "This partnership ensures expatriates' hard-earned money arrives instantly and securely in recipients' Nagad wallets. Beneficiaries can access funds anytime or withdraw cash at minimal cost from over 300,000 Nagad agent points nationwide, including in remote locations."

He added that the initiative would help modernise the remittance ecosystem and encourage increased inflows through formal channels.

Md Zahid Hossain, deputy managing director and chief risk officer of the bank; Mohammad Javed Tarek Khan and Khandaker Toufiq Hossain Khan, senior executive vice-presidents; and Md Ahsanul Haque Bashar, head of remittance at the mobile financial services (MFS) provider, along with other senior officials from both organisations, were also present at the event.

Md Motasem Billah, administrator of Nagad Limited, and Imtiaz Uddin Ahmed, managing director and CEO of Midland Bank PLC, pose for a photograph during the signing ceremony at the bank's head office in Gulshan, Dhaka recently.

PHOTO: MIDLAND BANK

Indian source says

FROM PAGE B4

The company did not immediately respond to a request seeking comment.

The Indian source said two other foreign-flagged tankers believed to be bound for India had recently transited the Strait, and that Iran had given assurances of safe passage for Indian-flagged vessels after the foreign ministers of both countries spoke by telephone late on Tuesday.

The source said the situation remained fluid, with limited clarity on how instructions were being relayed across different layers of Iran's administration.

In a statement after the talks between India's S. Jaishankar and his counterpart, Seyed Abbas Araghchi, Iran's foreign ministry said the United States should be held accountable for the "insecure situation and problems arising for shipping in the Persian Gulf".

Neither side mentioned any agreement on allowing safe passage for Indian vessels.

On Wednesday, India said 28 Indian-flagged vessels were operating west and east of the Strait with 778 Indian sailors aboard.

"Authorities, ship managers and recruitment agencies are coordinating closely with Indian embassies and local authorities to ensure safety and provide assistance to Indian seafarers," the Indian petroleum ministry said in a statement.

INDIA SHELTERING IRANIAN SAILORS

India has given safe harbour to 183 Iranian sailors from a vessel that docked after the war broke out between Iran and the United States and Israel.

New Delhi had allowed three Iranian ships that departed following a naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal to dock, but one was later sunk by a US submarine in international waters, and another sought assistance from Sri Lanka.

Iran has attacked at least 16 ships in the Strait since the war began in late February. Tehran has warned that oil prices could nearly double to $200 a barrel as it retaliates.

War disrupts

FROM PAGE B4

Other countries that source their gas from the Middle East to produce fertilisers, such as India, have had to ration supplies to their factories.

Bangladesh has temporarily shut down five out of six of them.

The UN expressed concern this week about access to fertilisers in some of the poorest countries.

CROP PRODUCTION AT RISK

Artificial fertilisers provide nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium necessary for crop growth.

For nitrogen-based fertilisers such as urea, ammonium nitrate and potassium, "global demand never ceases to increase, driven by Asia," said Sylvain Pellerin at INREA, a French agricultural research institute.

INREA models that without these three key fertiliser inputs, global crop production would fall by a third.

But nitrogen fertilisers require natural gas for their chemical synthesis, and a lot of energy.

As for sulfur, it is a co-product of the oil and gas industry. Where there is gas, you will find urea and ammonia," said the Argus's Marlow.

Production of phosphorus-based fertilisers starts with phosphate rock, of which Saudi Arabia supplies 20 percent of the world total but currently cannot ship it.

Dismissed employees of five Islamic banks want jobs back

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

A group of terminated employees from five Islamic banks formed a human chain in front of the Bangladesh Bank (BB) yesterday, demanding reinstatement of their jobs.

They alleged that around 10,000 employees were "unfairly dismissed" from those financial institutions.

Most of the participants in the protest reportedly came from Chattogram.

The protesters claimed that a large number of officials and employees working at Islami Bank Bangladesh PLC, First Security Islami Bank PLC, Union Bank PLC, Al-Arafah Islami Bank PLC, and Social Islami Bank PLC were dismissed "unjustly" after August 5, 2024.

The affected employees also submitted a memorandum to the BB governor, outlining several demands.

During the tenure of the Awami League government, these banks were under the control of the S Alam Group, a Chattogram-based conglomerate.

In 2017, the group took control of Islami Bank and Social Islami Bank and reportedly recruited a large number of employees from its home area of Patiya.

Following the fall of the Awami League government on August 5, 2024, individuals associated with the management of these banks reportedly went into hiding.

Under the interim government, the central bank dissolved and reconstituted the boards of 14 banks, including the five Islamic banks.

Employees fired from five Islamic banks after August 5, 2024 formed a human chain in front of Bangladesh Bank yesterday, demanding reinstatement of their jobs. PHOTO: COLLECTED

After taking charge, the newly formed boards verified the educational certificates of employees recruited during the Awami League era and reportedly found evidence of forged credentials in some cases.

They also arranged a test for those who had been recruited without job circulars or competitive examinations. Those who did not participate in the test subsequently lost their jobs.

However, the protesters claimed that many of the dismissed officials and employees had been performing their duties regularly for seven to eight years.

They alleged that a politically motivated group had subjected them to transfers, administrative harassment, deactivation of official IDs, and mental and physical intimidation before terminating their employment.

They said the dismissals had pushed many of them into severe financial hardship and demanded the immediate reinstatement of their jobs.

Ensure fuel supply for deep-sea fishing vessels

Operators' body urges govt

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Deep-sea fishing operators have urged the government to ensure fuel supply to fishing vessels on a priority basis so that marine fish harvesting can continue smoothly.

In a letter sent to the secretary of the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock, the Bangladesh Marine Fisheries Association (BMFA) said that around 200 fishing vessels are currently engaged in deep-sea fishing activities.

These vessels regularly harvest fish and shrimp from the deep sea to meet the country's growing demand for protein. In the last fiscal year alone, around 6.5 lakh tonnes of marine fish were caught. The fisheries sector contributes about 3.52 percent to the national gross domestic product (GDP), while fish production accounts for around 26.37 percent of output in the agriculture sector.

Fuel is the key input for operating deep-sea fishing vessels, the association said, adding that the supply of fuel oil has become irregular due to the ongoing US-Israel war on Iran.

Despite adequate fuel reserves in the country, fishing vessels are not receiving the required amount of fuel, the letter said. As a result, many vessels are unable to go to sea for fishing operations.

If fishing activities are disrupted, it may affect the country's fish supply and have a negative impact on export earnings from the sector, BMFA warned.

The association urged the authorities to take necessary measures to ensure the supply of fuel to deep-sea fishing vessels on a priority basis according to demand.

Citi shuts most UAE branches temporarily

REUTERS, *Dubai*

Citibank will close most of its United Arab Emirates branches and financial centres through March 14 as a precaution, its website showed on Thursday, as banks in the region sent staff home in response to a deepening Middle East conflict.

The US financial group's measures are the latest sign of growing concern among banks after Iran threatened Gulf banking interests linked to the US and Israel.

The Citi branch in the Mall of the Emirates in central Dubai is exempted from the closure, the bank said on its website, adding it plans to reopen all affected branches on March 16.

Citi had moved to a fully remote model for all UAE-based staff and was continuing to serve clients without interruption, a spokesperson for the bank told Reuters.

The US-Israeli war on Iran has so far killed around 2,000 people and thrown global energy markets and transport into chaos as the conflict has spread across the Middle East, with Iranian strikes against Israel, US bases and Gulf states.

Citi told its staff to evacuate offices in the Dubai International Financial Centre and Dubai's Oud Metha district this week and to work from home until further notice.

"The decision to evacuate three of our buildings and to close branches in the UAE was responsive to information we received and is consistent with our commitment to prioritise the safety of our colleagues," the spokesperson said.

HSBC, another major global bank, has closed all branches in Qatar until further notice, a customer notice said, to ensure the safety of staff and customers.

The war has dented Dubai's sales pitch to international businesses as the region's most reliable economic hub, prompting concerns of capital flight, layoffs and firms relocating elsewhere, Reuters reported last week.

Gold prices fall

REUTERS

Gold prices fell on Thursday, weighed down by a firmer US dollar and waning hopes for near-term US interest rate cuts as higher energy prices stoked inflation concerns.

Spot gold was down 0.2 percent at $5,167.15 per ounce as of 0718 GMT. US gold futures for April delivery fell 0.1 percent to $5,173.10.

The US dollar firmed 0.2 percent, making dollar-priced bullion more expensive for holders of other currencies.

"I think the USD strength and interrelated rates story is a slight headwind for gold despite the actual violence that's taking place, which is otherwise supportive of gold," said Nicholas Frappell, global head of institutional markets at ABC Refinery.

Iran said the world should brace for $200-a-barrel oil after its forces struck merchant ships on Wednesday, while the International Energy Agency urged a massive release of strategic reserves to blunt one of the worst oil shocks since the 1970s.

Oil prices rose over $100 a barrel, adding to inflation pressures, as Iran stepped up attacks on oil and transport facilities across the Middle East.

Iran has deployed about a dozen mines in the strait, according to sources, a move that could complicate efforts to reopen the narrow waterway, a key route for global oil and liquefied natural gas shipments.

Tankers in the strait have been stranded for more than a week, and producers have suspended output as storage nears capacity.

Goldman Sachs has delayed its forecast for US Federal Reserve rate cuts, and now expects quarter-point reductions in September and December, citing rising inflation risks linked to the Middle East conflict.

In economic data, the US consumer price index rose 0.3 percent in February, matching forecasts and accelerating from January's 0.2 percent increase. CPI rose 2.4 percent in the year to February, also in line with expectations.

Fuel panic buying

FROM PAGE B1

After arguing with attendants at a station at Rampura along with other buyers, he managed to buy fuel worth Tk 500 after waiting about 30 minutes. The following days were more difficult.

"On Monday after iftar, most pumps were closed, and I could not get fuel," he said. The next morning, he arrived at a station at 6:30 am and waited nearly two and a half hours.

"When two hours are spent just for getting fuel, the time available for taking passengers shrinks a lot."

Bangladesh imports most of its fuel. People familiar with the industry say the disruption is driven largely by panic buying rather than an actual shortage. Authorities introduced purchase limits after fears spread that the Middle East conflict could affect shipments.

Motorcycles were initially capped at two litres per day. After complaints from ride-sharing bikers, Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) increased the limit to five litres daily for app-based riders in metropolitan areas.

Despite the change, queues remain long at many stations across the capital. Among car drivers working with ride-sharing platforms, the experience varies depending on fuel type.

Drivers using compressed natural gas (CNG) report fewer problems, while those depending on petrol or diesel say it is becoming harder to operate normally.

Md Fakhruddin, a car driver working with on-demand ride-sharing platform Pathao, said he recently arrived at a pump at Mirpur-12 only to find there was no gas and had to search for another station.

Abdul Kader, an Uber driver who uses both compressed natural gas and fuel, said uncertainty over supply has kept him off the road on some days because he cannot refill the tank.

BSEC steps in

FROM PAGE B1

After receiving the allegation, the BSEC called a meeting on March 8, 2026 and received statements from independent directors, the company secretary and Ahmed.

The regulator found Mazed's allegations credible and said Ahmed had failed to adequately address them. Ahmed denied the allegations, telling The Daily Star that all actions complied with regulations.

Asked why he allowed non-director members in the board meeting, he said he allowed them because their resignations were not accepted.

Banks had not issued no-objection certificates (NOCs), and the Registrar of Joint Stock Companies and Firms (RJSC) only accepts resignations when banks give NOCs, he said.

The individuals had therefore withdrawn their resignations and were legally directors again, he stated, adding that this was not disclosed because such withdrawals are not mandatory disclosures under the corporate governance code.

Regarding forcing Mazed to make him the managing director, Ahmed said he had already been the acting managing director for more than a year. During this time, he has repaid loans of around Tk 200 crore.

"I did not force. Most directors of the company wanted me and appointed me as the managing director," he said.

He went on to say that, being a nontechnical person in legal matters, he regrets being unable to adequately address several technical and legal questions raised during the hearing at the BSEC.

He also challenged Mazed's independence, claiming she is the cousin of Professor Jonaid Shafiq, a former managing director and current director of the company.

Mazed acknowledged the family connection but said it does not disqualify her under the corporate governance code, which defines immediate family members more narrowly.

Navana Pharma, which was listed in 2022, saw sales rise 28 percent to Tk 884 crore in fiscal 2024-25. Its shares rose 1 percent to Tk 60 yesterday at the DSE.

Trade deficit widens

FROM PAGE B1

However, Ahmed warned that foreign exchange reserves may fall in the second half of FY26 because of weaker exports and rising imports. Still, unless there is a major policy setback or a prolonged Iran war, reserves are expected to stabilise at around $30 billion.

He added that declining exports, rising external debt and debt servicing, and the Iran war raise questions about the sustainability of the current BoP position.

To address these risks, Ahmed recommended diversifying exports, saying double-digit export growth will not be possible without it.

"One key requirement is flexible exchange rate management that avoids appreciation of the real effective exchange rate," he added.

His second priority was removing anti-export biases in trade policy and improving the country's investment climate.

USDA cuts

FROM PAGE B1

"As international export orders slow down, garment manufacturers have reduced their local yarn procurement, leaving domestic spinning mills burdened with an estimated Tk 12,000 crore ($1 billion) in unsold stockpiles," he said.

Strikingly, this massive inventory buildup persists even as severe natural gas and electricity shortages have already forced textile mills to slash their operating capacities to between 40 and 70 percent, he added.

The USDA revised the global production outlook upward by over 11 lakh bales to 1.21 crore bales, as larger crops in Brazil and China more than offset a smaller crop in Argentina.

It said global consumption is forecast to fall by more than one lakh bales to 1.18 crore bales due to reduced demand in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Mexico, and Vietnam.

Eid, approaching summer boost Rajshahi silk sales

PHOTO: AZAHAR UDDIN

As Eid draws near, the clatter of looms fills the air at silk factories in Rajshahi. *Clockwise from the left*, the recently taken photos show workers placing dyed saris on line for drying at Usha Silk factory, silkworm cocoons at Bangladesh Sericulture Development Board, and women busy at work at Sopura Silk Mills Limited, in Rajshahi city.

SHOHANUR RAHMAN RAFI

The words Rajshahi and silk remain nearly inseparable in the culture of Bangladesh. Ahead of Eid-ul-Fitr -- which coincided with the stuffy mid-spring weather this year -- the appeal of Rajshahi silk has surged. Factories across the city are busy with work, while seasonal shopping gains momentum.

Rajshahi silk was officially registered as a Geographical Indication (GI) product in 2017, reinforcing its prestige. For many buyers, wearing silk is not merely a fashion statement -- it is about embracing a legacy passed down through generations.

Every year, Eid, puja and other celebrations bring renewed demand for the city's iconic fabric. The Eid shopping rush is especially visible in the silk showrooms of the Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC) industrial area, where several privately owned silk mills operate their retail outlets alongside production units.

NO REST FOR LOOMS

As Eid draws near, an energetic clatter of looms fills the air at Sopura Silk Mills Limited. Looms run at one side of the compound, while artisans remain busy dyeing threads, weaving saris and adding delicate handwork on the other side. The showroom has been operating since 1980.

An expansive showroom is also housed in the compound, where shoppers browse through rows of vibrant garments -- traditional saris, panjabis, sherwanis, three-piece outfits, shirts, and scarves of various types and lengths.

According to Saidur Rahman, manager of the company, the Eid season always brings a surge of customers.

"Both Eids are busy, but this Eid [Eid-ul-Fitr] usually sees even larger crowds," he said. "We offer a wide variety of fabrics, including Balaka silk and raw silk."

The price of silk garments varies widely depending on quality. "Our saris start from around Tk 3,000 and can go up to Tk 50,000 or Tk 60,000," he added.

"Rajshahi silk is traditional, and that is why it continues to have strong demand."

Nasima Khanam, a customer searching for a suitable Eid outfit at Sopura Silk Limited, said silk remains her preferred choice for special occasions.

"It is part of our heritage. Silk is completely different from other fabrics," she said, adding that the fabric is exceptionally comfortable.

"Even though the price is a bit higher, I still prefer it."

Another shopper, Tasnia Hosne Afrin, said this year, Eid coincided with mid-spring. Winter has ended, and the season is starting to warm up. In this weather, silk clothing offers optimal comfort.

"Silk is very comfortable to wear in warm weather. People prefer comfort," she said.

PRODUCTIVITY WHITTLED DOWN AT STATE-RUN FACTORY

While private showrooms enjoy a festive uptick in business, the scenario remains different at the government-run Rajshahi Silk Factory, located near the Railgate area of the city.

The factory was originally established in 1961 and was later brought under the Bangladesh Silk Development Board in 1978.

In its prime, the facility played a major role in meeting the country's demand for silk yarn, which currently stands at about 300 tonnes annually.

However, the factory was shut down in 2002 due to sustained losses, and has remained closed for years before reopening on a limited scale in 2018. At the time of closure, it had 63 looms and produced about 116,000 yards of silk fabric annually.

At its peak, the factory employed nearly 600 officials, staff and workers, but now only 20 daily wage labourers keep the operations running. Currently, 20 power looms are in operation, producing around 6,000 metres of silk fabric each year.

Abul Kalam Azad, former manager of Rajshahi Silk Factory, said the factory is back to producing a range of silk products.

PHOTO: AZAHAR UDDIN

Eid shopping gains momentum at Sopura Silk Mills Limited in Rajshahi city.

"After the factory restarted, we began producing and selling Garad saris, printed saris, two-piece outfits, scarves, shawls, Motka fabric, Dhupian fabric, Balaka fabric and printed fabrics," he said.

He added that the factory once operated showrooms in several divisional cities across the country, but now only one sales centre remains active.

Much like the Sopura compound, the Rajshahi Silk Factory premises also have a small sales centre. However, customer turnout remains quite low due to a lack of publicity. Despite the disappointing sales, the factory continues to trudge along, keeping alive a legacy that dates back decades.

DOMESTIC YARN PRODUCTION SUFFERS

Silk threads are produced by silkworms, locally known as polu poka. Producing silk requires the sacrifice of large numbers of these insects. For example, more than 250 silkworms are needed to produce enough silk for a single tie. A sari requires about 5,000 silkworms, while producing enough silk for a shirt requires roughly 2,500.

Till 1991, the demand for silk yarn in Bangladesh was around 200 tonnes, half of which was produced domestically, while the rest was imported, said Liakat Ali, president of Bangladesh Silk Industry Owners' Association.

Currently, the country's demand for silk yarn has risen to about 500 tonnes, but only around four tonnes are supplied by domestic producers, with the remaining demand met through imports. Lower tariffs have made yarn imported from China cheaper and more widely available, which now dominates the local market.

As Chinese yarn floods the market, demand for local silk yarn has consequently dwindled. It has also affected mulberry nurseries.

Silkworms are fed mulberry leaves, so mulberry nurseries are set up exclusively to facilitate sericulture. Such nurseries have dwindled significantly, with many privately run nurseries shutting down, affecting thousands of silk farmers who have since shifted to other crops, while only 11 government-run nurseries are now operating in different parts of the country.

Bombs there, bills here

MAHTAB UDDIN AHMED

Trump seems to treat war like a reality show season finale: loud entry, dramatic lines, and then a tweet-sized promise that everything is under control, while the rest of the world is left counting the bill. Sadly, this is not Hollywood, and countries like Bangladesh end up paying for the popcorn, the petrol and the power cut too. As oil and LNG prices jump because of the Iran conflict, Bangladesh is scrambling to secure costly energy imports, with reports of fuel rationing and pressure on the power supply. So, while Trump may enjoy playing the global action hero, ordinary people from Tehran to Dhaka are stuck in the sequel nobody asked for: Madness in the Middle East, bills in Bangladesh.

For Bangladesh, the US-Israel war with Iran is not a distant conflict; it is an economic shock that can reach households, factories and markets very quickly. Bangladesh depends heavily on imported fuel and on trade routes exposed to disruption in the Middle East, so higher oil and LNG prices can feed directly into transport, electricity, food and industrial production costs. Inflation is already running above the IMF's projected 2026 level of 8.7 percent, so any fresh energy shock could worsen it and complicate the new central bank governor's hopes of eventually lowering interest rates and improving the foreign exchange reserve. What begins as a missile strike abroad can end up as a more expensive bus ride, a higher utility bill and a tougher borrowing environment at home.

The pressure points are clear. Reuters reports that Bangladesh's recent spot LNG purchases rose to roughly $20.76 to $28.28 per mmBtu, compared with about $10 in January, while Brent crude has returned to around $100 a barrel. That means imported inflation could intensify just as Bangladesh is trying to stabilise prices and support recovery.

On GDP impact, there is no settled Bangladesh-specific estimate yet, but the effect could be worse than India's projected loss of 0.5 percent because Bangladesh imports about 95 percent of its energy and has fewer buffers.

Mitigation, therefore, needs to be practical rather than theoretical. The government could encourage partial work from home on weekends or selected days for offices where feasible, so commuting demand and fuel use fall modestly without freezing the economy. It should also improve domestic gas availability and prioritise gas-based power and industrial supply where possible, reducing dependence on costlier oil products. Alongside that, Bangladesh can tighten energy efficiency in public buildings, cut non-essential fuel use, reduce overseas travel, and protect transport and power supply for export industries, hospitals and food logistics. None of these steps is dramatic, but crises are often managed through many small decisions taken early.

Other countries offer useful signals. India has already invoked emergency measures to boost LPG output and protect domestic supply, including maintaining access to Russian oil. South Korea has moved to cap domestic fuel prices and draw on large reserves, while the European Union is examining temporary relief on energy-related charges to ease pressure on industry. Japan, meanwhile, is again being reminded of the danger of overdependence on imported fossil fuels. Bangladesh cannot copy these models perfectly, but it can follow the same logic: diversify supply sources, cut unnecessary fuel use, shield priority sectors and move faster on alternatives before the shock deepens.

The blunt truth is this: wars launched in the name of strength often export weakness to poorer countries. Bangladesh did not vote for this war, but it may still pay through pricier fuel, slower factories, tighter reserves and anxious families waiting for money from abroad. That is why the right response is early preparation, energy discipline and realistic contingency planning. In global politics, powerful nations make decisions; in fragile economies, ordinary people receive the bill.

The writer is the founder of BuildCon Consultancies Ltd and BuildNation Ltd

Indian source says Iran to allow India-flagged tankers through Hormuz

REUTERS, *New Delhi*

Iran will allow Indian-flagged tankers to transit the Strait of Hormuz, a conduit for 40 percent of the South Asian nation's crude imports, an Indian government source said on Thursday, but an Iranian source outside the country denied any such deal was reached.

India, the world's No. 3 oil consumer, said on Thursday the foreign ministers of the two countries have had three conversations in recent days and the latest one this week focused on "issues pertaining to the safety of shipping and India's energy security".

"Beyond that, it would be premature for me to say anything," foreign ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal told a weekly media briefing.

The Indian source, who was briefed on the matter, declined to be identified, citing a lack of authorisation to speak to media, while the Iranian source said the matter was a sensitive one.

On Thursday, the Suezmax tanker Shenlong, carrying Saudi crude, arrived at a port in Mumbai after transiting the strait. The Liberia-flagged vessel was the first crude carrier to reach India from the Middle East since the war between Iran and the United States and Israel broke out in late February, according to LSEG data. The country is state-run Bharat Petroleum Corp said a source with direct knowledge of the matter.

READ MORE ON B2

War disrupts fertiliser supplies, puts food security at risk

AFP, *Paris*

With production in the Gulf countries at a standstill and gas prices rising, the war in the Middle East is disrupting the supply of fertilisers and posing risks for food security.

A third of fertiliser shipped by sea comes from the region and cannot make it to the global market as Iran has effectively closed the Strait of Hormuz.

That has sent global fertiliser prices soaring, with the UN expressing concern in particular about the impact on developing countries.

THE GULF IS A KEY MANUFACTURER

Natural gas is a key feedstock to make artificial fertilisers, and with its ample gas supplies the Gulf region has become a key manufacturer.

The region produces nearly half of the sulphur sold worldwide and a third of urea -- "the most widely traded fertiliser of all", said Sarah Marlow, global editor for fertilisers at Argus Media.

It also produces a quarter of globally traded ammonia, another feedstock for fertiliser production, she said.

Major food producing nations like the United States and Australia source much of their urea and phosphate from the Gulf nations.

Brazil, the world's leading soybean producer, imports most of its urea from Qatar and from Iran, which also exports to Turkey and Mexico.

India relies upon Saudi phosphate.

Asia in particularly dependent upon on the Gulf: it imports 64 percent of its ammonia and more than 50 percent of its sulphur and phosphates from the region, according to 2024 figures from Kpler.

But since the start of the conflict, which has seen Iran launch retaliatory strikes against its Gulf neighbours following US and Israeli strikes, production has had to be shut down at fertiliser production facilities, particularly in Qatar.

Farmers load sacks of fertiliser into a seeder on a wheat field in Nanyang, Henan province, China. Asia is particularly dependent upon the Gulf: Asian countries import 64 percent of their ammonia and more than 50 percent of their sulphur and phosphates from the Middle East.

PHOTO: REUTERS/FILE

And the Strait of Hormuz remains largely unnavigable.

A Chinese vessel loaded with sulphur was able to leave on March 7, but around 20 other ships were still waiting as of the middle of the week, according to Kpler, which tracks commodity flows.

GLOBAL REPERCUSSIONS

While Europe appears at first blush to be less exposed, sourcing just 11 percent of its urea from the region, it will likely be impacted indirectly.

Morocco is a big supplier of phosphorus-based fertilisers to Europe, but is dependent upon the Gulf for sulphur used in their manufacturing.

The EU also imports 26 percent of its urea from Egypt, but the country is confronted by a halt of natural gas supplies from Israel by pipeline, pointed out Argus Media consultant Arthur Portier.

"Egyptian urea has gone from $500 per tonne at the start of the war to more than $650. There is a direct impact on the price of fertiliser" for European farmers, he said.

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