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Star BUSINESS

Farmers pay more for fertilisers despite no major shortage

Weak monitoring and patchy distribution cause artificial crises amid war-led supply disruptions

A farmer spreads fertiliser across a paddy field in Rajshahi district during the Boro season. Boro paddy accounts for most of the country's annual fertiliser use. The photo was taken recently. PHOTO: AZAHAR UDDIN

SUKANTA HALDER, S DILIP ROY *and* DIPANKAR ROY

Mamunur Rashid expects to harvest his Boro paddy and maize in the coming months. The crops need no more fertiliser before reaping, and so far, he has not faced any major supply problem.

Now he is preparing plots for green chillies, brinjal and two hybrid varieties of paddy. Those crops will require different nutrients.

The farmer in northern district Kurigram said there have been no supply disruptions or price hikes for high-nitrogen urea or muriate of potash (MOP), a concentrated potassium fertiliser.

But phosphate fertilisers are another matter. Rashid said supplies of both di ammonium phosphate, known as DAP, and triple superphosphate, or TSP, are thin on the ground and prices are higher than usual.

The US-Israel's war on Iran and the wider Middle East conflict have rattled global fertiliser supply chains, pushing up prices and fuelling food security concerns worldwide. In a recent report, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) said Bangladesh faces an "extreme risk profile" in fertiliser supply.

Officials, however, reject the idea of an imminent crunch. They say urea stocks will last until June and non-urea supplies until October.

However, The Daily Star, after speaking to farmers in at least 10 districts across the country, found instances of overpricing linked to supply shortages, which officials attributed to attempts to cash in on war-driven disruptions.

Zahurul Haque, a farmer at Aditmari upazila of Lalmonirhat, said the local authorised dealer could not provide enough phosphate fertiliser. He bought TSP and DAP from retailers instead, paying more.

Phosphate fertilisers are vital for strong plant growth and better yields. Without them, productivity suffers.

According to the Bangladesh Agricultural Development

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Starlink gains just 3,500 users after 8 months in Bangladesh

MAHMUDUL HASAN

Elon Musk's Starlink has received a lukewarm response in Bangladesh in the first eight months since its launch in the country, as prices up to ten times higher than local broadband fail to attract subscribers.

The satellite internet service, operated by SpaceX, attracted only 3,469 customers as of January 2026, according to data from the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC).

Starlink received its operating licence on April 29, 2025, and officially launched on May 20, initially offering two residential packages priced at Tk 6,000 and Tk 4,200 per month.

These rates are at least ten times higher than local broadband services, which on average start at Tk 400 for 5 Mbps and can reach up to Tk 1,200 for 40 Mbps.

Bangladesh has over 13 crore internet subscribers, including 1.45 crore broadband users.

Starlink's uptake in Bangladesh is also considerably slower than in other markets where it launched in recent years.

In Kenya, which has fewer than 3 crore internet users, Starlink has managed to gain 4,808 subscribers in eight months since its July 2023 launch, according to data from the country's Communications Authority.

Nigeria, with over 15 crore reported internet users, recorded 23,897 Starlink subscribers roughly 11 months after launching in January 2023, according to the Nigerian Communications Commission.

Industry insiders say Bangladesh's dense population, widespread low-cost fibre coverage, and extensive mobile internet penetration have limited Starlink's appeal.

Three authorised resellers -- Robi Axiata, Felicity IDC, and Bangladesh Satellite Company -- have each signed $2.5 million deals to distribute Starlink's business and priority plans.

All three report difficulty finding customers willing to pay premium prices.

"General users are concentrated in areas with fibre coverage," said Shah Ahmedul Kabir, general manager for sales and marketing at Bangladesh Satellite Company.

"So, we are focusing on niche markets such as hill tracts, remote char areas, maritime applications for fishing boats, and mobile connectivity on long-haul buses and trains," he added.

Bangladesh Satellite Company has sold around 400 Starlink terminals and connected 12 schools across three hill tract districts, with plans to expand to over 150 schools.

Sharful Alam, chief executive of Felicity IDC, said enterprises view Starlink primarily as backup internet connectivity rather than a core service.

"It's unlikely that people will abandon existing broadband services, given the significant price difference," he said.

Felicity IDC's Starlink packages, offering 1 TB (terabyte) to 4 TB data allowances, range from Tk 25,000 to Tk 75,000.

Starlink has built infrastructure at Hi-Tech City in

READ MORE ON B3

Brent heads for record monthly jump

REUTERS, *New Delhi*

Oil prices extended gains on Monday, with Brent headed for a record monthly rise, after Yemeni Houthis launched their first attacks on Israel over the weekend, widening the US-Israel war with Iran in the Middle East.

Brent crude futures jumped $3.94, or 3.5 percent, to $116.51 a barrel at 0703 GMT after settling 4.2 percent higher on Friday.

US West Texas Intermediate was at $102.14 a barrel, up $1.86, or 1.87 percent, following a 5.5 percent gain in the previous session.

"The market has all but discounted the prospect of a negotiated end to the war, Trump's claims of ongoing 'direct and indirect' talks with Iran notwithstanding, and is bracing for a sharp escalation in military hostilities, which is a bullish signal for crude, with huge uncertainties on the timing and nature of the outcome," said Vandana Hari, founder of oil market analysis provider Vanda Insights.

US President Donald Trump said the US and Iran have been meeting "directly and indirectly" and that Iran's new leaders have been "very reasonable", as more U.S troops arrived in the region, while the Israeli military said on Monday it is attacking the Iranian government's infrastructure throughout Tehran.

Brent has soared 59 percent this month, the steepest monthly jump, exceeding gains seen during the 1990 Gulf War, after the Iran conflict effectively closed the Strait of Hormuz, a conduit for a fifth of the world's oil and gas supplies.

READ MORE ON B3

Foreign loan commitments rise, but disbursal slows

MD ASADUZ ZAMAN

Bangladesh secured higher foreign loan commitments in the first eight months of the current fiscal year, yet actual disbursement fell by 26 percent compared with the same period last year, raising concerns about the country's ability to use external funds effectively.

Between the July-February period, foreign loan disbursement dropped to $3.05 billion, down from $4.13 billion a year earlier, according to data released by the Economic Relations Division (ERD) yesterday.

The decline was driven largely by slower project aid, the primary channel for financing infrastructure and development projects.

Disbursement under project assistance fell to just above $3 billion in the first eight months of this fiscal year, compared with over $4.1 billion during the same period last year.

This slowdown comes despite nearly $40 billion in financing commitments from foreign lenders.

Analysts say the widening gap between pledged funds and actual disbursement reflects Bangladesh's limited capacity to use external resources on time.

Foreign aid is crucial for roads, power plants, and social sector projects, but delays can reduce project benefits and increase costs.

The trend is particularly concerning as Bangladesh's external debt servicing rises. During the July-February period, the country paid $2.9 billion in principal and interest, up from $2.63 billion a year earlier.

Deen Islam, professor of economics at Dhaka University, said the figures indicate a gradual shift from development financing to debt rollover.

"When a large portion of new external borrowing is used to service existing debt rather than finance productive investment, the net inflow of resources into the economy declines," he said.

"Infrastructure and development spending may slow, while rising debt servicing puts additional pressure on foreign exchange reserves and the exchange rate," Islam said.

READ MORE ON B3

WTO conference concludes without major agreements

14th WTO Ministerial Conference
Yaoundé - Cameroon
2026

REFAYET ULLAH MIRDHA

The 14th Ministerial Conference (MC14) of the World Trade Organization (WTO) concluded early yesterday with no significant agreements, except promises to continue working towards consensus on disputed issues among member countries.

The four-day conference, which began on March 26, saw nearly 2,000 officials, including more than 90 ministers, debate key topics such as the moratorium on customs duties for electronic transmissions and broader WTO reform.

Originally scheduled to end on Sunday, the meeting stretched past midnight as ministers tried to bridge gaps on major issues.

DEADLOCK ON E-COMMERCE MORATORIUM

The WTO's moratorium on customs duties for electronic transmissions expired yesterday after nearly three decades. Negotiations in Yaoundé continued late into the night but concluded without a final agreement.

Diplomats worked to reconcile differences between Brazil, which initially sought a two-year extension and later proposed a four-year extension with a mid-term review, and the United States, which pushed for a permanent moratorium to protect major companies such as Amazon and Apple from digital taxation.

A draft proposal for a four-year extension with a one year sunset buffer, extending the moratorium to 2031, was also discussed but not agreed upon, reports Reuters.

Developing countries, including India, opposed a lengthy extension, arguing that the moratorium denies them potential tax revenue that could be reinvested domestically. Some 66 nations, however, agreed to an interim arrangement pending ratification.

WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala said, "The e-commerce moratorium had expired, meaning countries could apply duties on electronic goods such as digital downloads and streaming. But we hope to be able to restore the moratorium and Brazil and the US were trying to reach agreement on it. They need more time and we didn't have the time here."

Close to agreement before the talks ended. Completion of any reform deal, however, will depend on resolving recurring issues, such as improving consensus-based decision-making and extending trade benefits to developing countries. Ministers also fell short of expectations on agriculture and other areas.

Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala welcomed progress in discussions on WTO reform, fisheries subsidies, and other issues.

KEY OUTCOMES

The WTO announced that ministers agreed to continue negotiations on

● The conference, which began on March 26, overran due to a deadlock	● The e-commerce duties moratorium expired	● Brazil and the US disagreed on the extension
● WTO reform talks made partial progress	● Two small decisions aided minor economies, trade rules	● Talks will continue in Geneva this May

Cameroon Trade Minister Luc Magloire Mbarga Atangana, chair of MC14, added that WTO talks would continue in Geneva, expected in May.

Britain's Business and Trade Secretary Peter Kyle called the failure to reach a collective decision in Yaoundé a "major setback for global trade."

REFORM TALKS MAKE PARTIAL PROGRESS

Ministers and delegates made some progress drafting a plan for broader WTO reform, though no final agreements were reached, reports AFP. They were tasked with creating an action plan to revitalise the organisation, weakened by geopolitical tensions, stalled negotiations, and rising protectionism.

A draft reform roadmap outlining timelines and key issues, seen by Reuters, was fisheries subsidies, aiming to present recommendations at the 15th Ministerial Conference for comprehensive rules.

Two decisions were also adopted that had been previously endorsed in Geneva: improving the integration of small economies into the multilateral trading system, and enhancing the implementation of special and differential treatment provisions under the Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS) and Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) agreements.

The WTO director-general confirmed that members would return to Geneva with drafts of the Yaoundé Ministerial Declaration on WTO Reform and Work Plan, the Ministerial Decision on Electronic Commerce, the Ministerial Decision on TRIPS Non-Violation and Situation Complaints, and the LDC package.

Prime Bank, Vista Electronics partner to offer benefits for customers

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Prime Bank PLC has recently entered into a partnership agreement with Vista Electronics Limited, a home appliance manufacturer in Bangladesh, to offer benefits to its customers.

Joarder Tanvir Faisal, head of cards and retail assets at Prime Bank PLC, and Lokman Hossain Akash, managing director of Vista Electronics Limited, signed the agreement at the bank's corporate office in Dhaka, according to a press release.

Under the agreement, Prime Bank customers will enjoy special discounts on various products offered by Vista Electronics Ltd.

The partnership reflects Prime Bank's ongoing commitment to enhancing customer value by offering lifestyle benefits through strategic collaborations with reputed partners, the release added.

Hossain Mohammad Zakaria, head of customer propositions at the bank, and Sufia Noor Shilpi, assistant general manager and head of corporate sales at the electronics appliance manufacturer, along with other senior officials from both organisations, were also present.

Lokman Hossain Akash, managing director of Vista Electronics Limited, and Joarder Tanvir Faisal, head of cards and retail assets at Prime Bank PLC, pose for a photograph after signing the agreement at the bank's corporate office in Dhaka recently. PHOTO: PRIME BANK

Aristopharma, bKash team up to enable direct stakeholder payouts

Ali Ahmmed, chief commercial officer of bKash Limited, and Mohammad Sahid Hassan, deputy managing director of Aristopharma Limited, pose for a photograph after signing the agreement at the drug maker's head office in Dhaka recently. PHOTO: BKASH

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Aristopharma Limited, one of the country's leading pharmaceutical companies, has recently signed an agreement with bKash Limited, the leading mobile financial service (MFS) provider in Bangladesh to disburse payments directly to its stakeholders through bKash.

The initiative is expected to simplify field-level financial management, making it more transparent and secure.

It will also support the development of a cashless ecosystem by reducing the risks associated with handling physical cash.

Mohammad Sahid Hassan, deputy managing director of Aristopharma Limited, and Ali Ahmmed, chief commercial officer of bKash Limited, signed the agreement at the drug maker's head office in Dhaka, according to a press release.

As part of the agreement, Aristopharma will use bKash's "Disbursement Solution" to send payments directly to stakeholders' bKash accounts.

Recipients will be able to cash out funds from bKash agent points or ATM booths nationwide.

Alternatively, they can use their balances digitally for a range of services, including merchant payments, utility bill payments (gas, electricity and water), money transfers and mobile recharges.

They can also pay educational or government fees, open DPS accounts in banks, purchase travel tickets and make donations.

Ahmed Imtiaz Hassan, director of Aristopharma; Md Maminul Islam, executive director and company secretary; Mohammad Siddiqul Alam Sikder, executive director; Masrur Chowdhury, head of business sales at bKash; and Md Somel Reza Khan, general manager of the business sales department, were also present at the event.

Mahbub Anam elected BAPA president

Mahbub Anam

SM Shoaib Hasan

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Mahbub Anam, managing director of Lal Teer Seed Limited, and Syed Muhammad Shoaib Hasan, managing director of Boyalkhali Agro-based Industries, have been elected president and general secretary, respectively, of the Bangladesh Agro-Processors' Association (BAPA) for a two-year term (2026-28).

Uzma Chowdhury, director of PRAN Agro Limited, and Moshiur Rahman, managing director of Paragon Agro Limited, were also elected senior vice-president and vice-president of the association, according to a press release.

Mohammad Delwar Hossain, chairman of the BAPA election board and deputy secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, announced the results following the association's biennial election held on March 15.

Mohammad Hashib Sarker and Sheikh Shamsul Arefeen, members of the election board and senior assistant secretaries of the ministry, assisted the chairman to hold the election.

Minhaj Ahmed, managing director of Ahmed Food Products (Pvt) Limited, was elected treasurer.

Anayet Rashid, director of Lalmai Food Products Limited; Kohinoor Kamal, chairperson of Meridian Foods Limited; Mohammad Wahidul Islam, director of Kishwan Snacks Limited; Mohammad Babul Sareng, managing director of Majestic Enterprise (Pvt) Limited; Michael De, proprietor of Thai Food Products; Md Moin Uddin, director of Star Line Food Products Limited; Mohammad Al Imran, proprietor of Fahmida Consumer Products; Md Lablu Hossain, proprietor of Habib Food Products; Md Mizanur Rahman, proprietor of Need Agro Foods; and Papon Rahman, proprietor of FA Food Products, were included in the 15-member executive committee of BAPA.

China's neighbours

FROM PAGE B4

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not immediately respond to questions from Reuters.

'A TRIED AND TESTED PLAYBOOK'

China's flagship Belt and Road infrastructure initiative has seen world leaders regularly congregate in Beijing to discuss 'win-win' cooperation but with the region now short on fuel and fertiliser, Southeast Asian capitals are instead looking for replacements from the likes of Russia.

"China won't want to create expectations it can't sustain. Beijing has no desire to be a regional energy backstop for an indefinite period of disruption," according to Ruby Osman, a senior policy adviser at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change.

Beijing will likely stick to its tried-and-tested playbook: imposing sharp, broad curbs on energy and energy-related exports before selectively resuming trade once officials are confident domestic demand can be met, she said.

Famine and scarcity remain deeply embedded in China's political consciousness, with the trauma of Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution still close enough to remember.

"Only if China gets more comfortable with its own exposure, then I would expect meaningful support," said Max Zenglein, senior economist at the Conference Board Asia. "I expect any support will be very transactional. Not a good position to be in if you are one those countries, unfortunately."

Wang Jin, a senior fellow at the Beijing Club for International Dialogue, a think tank under China's foreign ministry, said Beijing could also benefit if the shock pushes trading partners to accelerate investment in green and nuclear energy, sectors where China leads after years of state-backed investment.

A riskier Mideast

FROM PAGE B4

A structurally higher oil price would change the upstream calculus for the world's energy giants.

This shift comes as the industry's appetite for new oil and gas investment has been strengthening. Over the past year, oil companies have significantly increased spending on exploration worldwide – from West Africa and the eastern Mediterranean to Brazil and Southeast Asia.

That was a sharp break from the prior decade, when shareholder pressure and fears of a rapid demand decline driven by the energy transition reduced upstream investment. Today, companies – spurred by new outlooks suggesting fossil fuel demand won't peak until next decade – are increasingly confident that more supply will be needed through the end of the decade.

Of course, exploration remains a high-risk, high-reward business requiring heavy upfront investment. Projects can also often take more than a decade to progress from the first drilling campaign to production.

Still, higher long-term prices would expand the pool of economically viable reserves worldwide. And, importantly, the spiking risk premium in the Middle East is likely to push more capital toward regions previously deemed more risky or marginal.

Venezuela offers a case in point. Its oil industry reopened to Western companies after the US deposed President Nicolas Maduro in January, yet investment in the country has remained tepid given political uncertainty and concerns over the sector's dilapidated infrastructure.

In a more bullish price environment, however, Venezuela's vast resources could suddenly appear more appealing – particularly if the relative geopolitical risk gap between Venezuela and the Gulf shrinks.

Iran inflation rate rises to 50.6%: statistics centre

AFP, *Tehran*

Iran's annual inflation rate rose to 50.6 percent by mid-March, up three percentage points from the previous month, the country's official statistics centre said on Sunday.

"The inflation rate for the twelve months ending in Esfand (from February 20 to March 20) reached 50.6 percent,"the centre said in a statement carried by the official IRNA news agency.

The rate had stood at 47.5 percent in the previous month, covering the period from January 21 to February 19.

The rise in prices comes with Iran at war with the United States and Israel since February 28, when strikes that killed the country's supreme leader triggered a conflict that has since spread across the Middle East.

On March 20, Iran marked the start of the Nowruz holidays, the Persian New Year.

Vietnam textile

FROM PAGE B4

In practice, export orders have not been significantly affected, but risks remain, particularly for shipping routes passing through the region to Europe and partly to the US East Coast.

Shipping companies have increased insurance premiums, adding costs, while importing materials such as cotton from the US takes longer due to rerouting, affecting production schedules.

Orders that previously took about two months including shipping now require up to one and a half months for transportation alone, causing disruptions. Although total production time remains unchanged, longer delivery times require careful adjustment of production schedules, Cầm said.

He emphasised that textile enterprises must prioritise resilience amid uncertainty by maintaining financial flexibility, managing exchange rate and raw material risks, restructuring supply chains and upgrading value-added capabilities.

"In a context where high tariffs are becoming the new normal, competitive advantage will belong to companies that control costs well, comply with origin requirements and ensure fast delivery," he said.

Lê Tiến Trường, Vinatex chairman, added that amid volatility in tariffs, geopolitics and logistics costs, businesses must remain proactive and flexible, developing specific action plans based on different scenarios. For the EU market, companies need to prepare for changing transport routes, rising logistics costs and longer delivery times. For the US market, they must anticipate continued pressure from buyers to adjust prices, especially as China maintains a low yuan, increasing competition.

Companies are advised to accelerate shipments during the 150-day period when an additional 10 percent tariff applies to optimise delivery plans and reduce policy risks. Maintaining balance across production, finance and markets will determine business resilience, allowing companies to retain market share, stabilise employment and achieve growth targets.

RMG sector faces headwinds, outlook cautiously moderate: BB

Report says economic recovery of importing nations, diversification, global supply chain stability key to sector's export growth

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Readymade garment (RMG) export performance in the coming quarters will largely depend on the pace of economic recovery in major importing countries, stabilisation of global supply chains, and the ability of the sector to diversify products and markets, the Bangladesh Bank (BB) said in a report.

The near-term outlook for the readymade garments industry will remain "cautiously moderate," reflecting a combination of external demand uncertainty and emerging opportunities in key export markets, according to the "Quarterly Review of Readymade Garments (RMG): October-December of FY26" by the BB.

"Strengthening logistics, enhancing productivity and expanding into higher value apparel segments might be critical for maintaining the competitiveness of Bangladesh in the global garment market," the BB said.

The RMG sector continued to occupy the dominant share in the export basket of Bangladesh, accounting for 80.36 percent of total export earnings during the October-December period of fiscal year (FY) 2026.

Amid persistent global demand uncertainty, the sector saw a contraction, with earnings reaching $9.74 billion, a 5.99 percent decline from the $10.36 billion recorded during the same period in the previous fiscal year.

Global demand conditions, inflationary pressures in importing countries, shifts in consumer spending patterns, and supply chain adjustments continue to influence order volumes and export receipts, the BB said.

In addition, production costs, exchange rate movements, and logistical conditions play a considerable role in shaping the competitiveness of Bangladesh's garment exports.

Together, these trends show a large and resilient industry providing the bulk of export earnings and employment, yet facing growing short-term headwinds as it moves into the rest of FY26, the BB added.

Product-wise shares during the second quarter of FY26 showed that among RMG items, the contribution of knitwear exports was 41.88 percent, while woven exports was 38.48 percent.

Among non-RMG items, agricultural products accounted for 4.40 percent, jute goods for 3.35 percent, and leather and leather products for 2.39 percent.

The top destinations for Bangladesh's RMG exports during October-December of FY26, including the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, Spain, France, the Netherlands, Italy, Canada, and Belgium, represented a 70.07 percent share.

Philippines oil refinery secures 2.5m barrels of Russian crude

AFP, *Manila*

The Philippines' sole oil refinery has secured nearly 2.5 million barrels of Russian crude out of "extreme necessity", a stock exchange filing revealed Monday, as the country seeks to replenish fast-dwindling fuel reserves.

The Philippines has seen the price of fuel hit historic highs since the US-Israeli war with Iran forced the partial closure of the Strait of Hormuz, with President Ferdinand Marcos most recently saying stocks could last until June 30.

AFP reported last week that a tanker filled with Russian crude oil had arrived at the harbour servicing refinery operator Petron Corp, a purchase unthinkable before longtime treaty ally the United States eased sanctions tied to Moscow's war in Ukraine.

In a report to the Philippine stock exchange released Monday, Petron said it had agreed to purchase Russian crude after seeing at least four million barrels in shipments cancelled since the start of the Middle East war.

"The purchases were undertaken strictly out of extreme necessity as an extraordinary emergency measure in response to unprecedented geopolitical and supply-chain disruptions and only after exhausting all commercially viable alternatives," the report reads.

"A refinery shutdown for failure to secure crude would lead to serious nationwide fuel shortages and sharp price spikes," said the company, whose refinery accounts for about 30 percent of the country's fuel needs.

Since the war began, the cost of diesel and gasoline has skyrocketed, driving protests by groups representing the country's jeepney drivers and others.

Prices were set to tick up again on Tuesday.

Farmers pay more for fertilisers

FROM PAGE B1

Corporation, the government-fixed retail price per kilogramme is Tk 27 for TSP, Tk 21 for DAP and Tk 20 for MOP.

But Rafiqul Islam, from Moghalhat village in Lalmonirhat Sadar upazila, said he paid Tk 8 to Tk 10 more per kilogramme for TSP and DAP.

In Rajshahi, Muktar Ali of Damkura in Paba upazila said DAP prices have been elevated for some time. A sack officially priced at Tk 1,050 is selling for Tk 1,300 to Tk 1,350, and in some areas as much as Tk 1,400.

In Khulna, Md Ibrahim at Masalia village at Batiaghata upazila cultivated Boro paddy on one and a half bighas this year. He bought urea at Tk 1,455 per sack. For watermelon, he paid Tk 1,850 for small-grain urea.

"They [sellers] never give a receipt. Besides, when we go to buy fertiliser, we are forced to buy pesticides. If we don't buy those, they refuse to sell fertiliser," he added.

GOVT SAYS FERTILISER STOCKS SUFFICIENT

Shaikhul Arifin, deputy director of Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) in Lalmonirhat, blamed unscrupulous dealers for hoarding fertiliser and creating artificial crises to make a quick buck.

He said mobile courts are carrying out drives against overpricing and artificial shortages.

Abdullah Al Mamun, deputy director of DAE in Kurigram, said there is no significant shortage in his district. However, he acknowledged reports of higher prices in remote areas without authorised dealers.

Sirajul Islam, additional director of the Rangpur regional office of DAE, pointed to local demand patterns.

"The tendency of tobacco cultivation is higher in Rangpur, Lalmonirhat and Nilphamari districts. In areas where tobacco is cultivated, the demand for fertiliser increases and shortages sometimes occur."

"We are identifying the causes of the fertiliser shortage and will send a report to the ministry," he said.

Md Rafiqul Islam, additional director of DAE in Khulna, said officials are monitoring the market. "If anyone charges higher prices, dealers are punished through mobile courts, and in some cases, their licences are cancelled."

Md Aminul Islam, deputy director for fertiliser management at the field service wing of DAE, said there is currently no shortage of urea or other fertilisers nationwide. There is, therefore, no justification for higher prices, he said, describing the situation as an artificial scarcity.

Agriculture Minister Mohammed Aminur Rashid told The Daily Star that stocks of both urea and non-urea fertilisers are sufficient for the coming months.

The minister acknowledged complaints of overpricing at the local level and said authorities are investigating.

He added that field officials have been instructed to address irregularities swiftly and assured that specific complaints will be resolved within 48 hours once detailed information is provided.

[Our Rajshahi correspondent Shohanur Rahman Rafi contributed to this report.]

Foreign loan

FROM PAGE B1

He added that the situation could also fuel imported inflation. While not yet a crisis, he described it as a "warning sign".

"If this trend persists, policymakers will face difficult trade-offs between taking on more debt and reallocating domestic resources away from development spending," he said.

Meanwhile, Monzur Hossain, member (secretary) of the General Economics Division (GED) under the Planning Commission, said, "Loan disbursement is directly tied to project progress. When implementation slows, disbursement inevitably falls."

He pointed to structural bottlenecks, particularly in investment projects.

"Many projects involve complex conditions, and meeting those requirements takes time. Land acquisition remains a major challenge in many cases," Hossain said.

He also noted weaknesses in the execution of the Annual Development Programme (ADP) as a key factor. "Since most of these loans are linked to ADP projects, delays in overall project execution translate into slower disbursement," he added.

During the period of the interim government, many projects were almost stagnant. However, Hossain expressed optimism about improvement in the coming months.

"Now, with a political government in place, monitoring has increased, projects are being prioritised, and delays are being scrutinised more closely," he said.

"I expect the situation to improve soon, particularly in the final months of the fiscal year as measures taken by the Planning Commission begin to take effect," he added.

Brent heads for record monthly jump

FROM PAGE B1

The war, launched on February 28 with US and Israeli strikes on Iran, has spread across the Middle East, raising concern about shipping lanes around the Arabian Peninsula and the Red Sea.

The Israeli military on Monday said Iran launched multiple waves of missiles at Israel and an attack had also been launched from Yemen for only the second time since the war began.

"The conflict is no longer concentrated in the Persian Gulf and around the Strait of Hormuz, but now extends into the Red Sea and the Bab el-Mandeb — one of the world's most crucial chokepoints for crude and refined product flows," JP Morgan analysts led by Natasha Kaneva said in a note.

Saudi crude exports re-directed from the Strait of Hormuz to the Yanbu port in the Red Sea reached 4.658 million barrels per day last week, data from analytics firm Kpler showed.

If exports from Yanbu were disrupted, Saudi oil would need to pivot toward Egypt's Suez-Mediterranean (SUMED) pipeline to the Mediterranean, JP Morgan analysts said.

Attacks in the region escalated over the weekend and damaged Oman's Salalah terminal despite efforts to start ceasefire talks.

Iran said it was ready to respond to a US ground attack, accusing Washington on Sunday of preparing a land assault even as it sought negotiations.

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar said they had covered possible ways to bring an early and permanent end to the war in the region as well as potential US-Iran talks in Islamabad.

Separately, Vietnam's Binh Son Refining and Petrochemical on Monday said it is in talks with Russian partners to buy crude oil. The company said it would also buy more crude oil from Africa, the US and Southeast Asia.

Starlink gains

FROM PAGE B1

Kaliakair, Gazipur, with gateways managed by Felicity IDC. Additional gateways operate in Rajshahi, managed by Bondstein Technologies, and in Jashore, also managed by Felicity IDC.

Summit Communications has connected the Kaliakair and Rajshahi sites via fibre links.

Starlink has also proposed exporting unfiltered bandwidth to neighbouring countries. BTRC is reviewing the proposal and plans to seek government approval, according to regulatory documents.

The regulator has emphasised strict conditions to ensure foreign traffic remains separate from domestic users.

Experts say that if approved, the arrangement could position Bangladesh as a regional data hub and generate foreign currency for local operators, though regulators are considering safeguards, including traffic separation, real-time monitoring, and compliance measures.

Bangladesh seeks New Zealand's support for RCEP

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Bangladesh has sought New Zealand's support to join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the world's largest trade pact.

The request was made on Sunday during a bilateral meeting between Commerce Minister Khandaker Abdul Muktadir and New Zealand Trade and Investment Minister Todd McClay in Yaounde, on the sidelines of the World Trade Organization conference, according to a press release.

Muktadir highlighted Bangladesh's strategic geographical position at the crossroads of South Asia and Southeast Asia, along with its growing middle class, as key factors for inclusion in the pact.

He said the newly elected government is focused on integrating into global value chains and fostering a business-friendly environment for trade-led growth.

In response, New Zealand's trade and investment minister praised Bangladesh's economic potential and described the country as a "suitable partner" for RCEP. He assured cooperation in coordinating with other member states regarding Bangladesh's inclusion.

McClay also proposed initiating negotiations for a bilateral free trade agreement to expand trade and signal a positive environment for investors.

The RCEP, which includes 15 Asia-Pacific nations such as China, Japan, and Australia, accounts for 30 percent of global GDP. It features unified rules of origin and 90 percent tariff elimination to streamline regional supply chains.

The meeting also touched upon Bangladesh's broader trade strategy following its graduation from the least developed country category.

Japanese investors want tax, regulatory reforms

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Unpredictable tax practices, weak enforcement, and conflicting regulatory directives continue to raise costs and delay operations for businesses, Japanese investors said yesterday.

Speaking at an event at The Westin Dhaka, marking the Japan Business Day, they argued that without policy continuity, transparent administration, and reliable dispute resolution, long-term investment decisions remain at risk. The programme was jointly organised by the Embassy of Japan, Bangladesh and Japan External Trade Organisation (Jetro).

"Clear, consistent and fairly applied rules are vital to improve Bangladesh's investment climate. Uncertainty often outweighs product competitiveness," said Manabu Sugawara, president of Japanese Commerce and Industry Association in Dhaka (JCIAD), commonly known as Shoo-Koo-Kai.

He identified tax reform as a priority, calling for simpler procedures, clearer interpretations and reduced discretionary practices, alongside faster services and reliable dispute resolution.

Sugawara highlighted poor coordination among government agencies, saying conflicting directives create delays and raise costs for investors.

He also urged a functional one-stop service with fully digital, streamlined and time-bound approvals, licensing and renewals.

Pointing to persistent visa and permit delays, he said such bottlenecks must be resolved quickly.

Hiroshi Uegaki, country representative of Mitsubishi Corporation, one of Japan's corporate giants, called for foundational reforms to strengthen Bangladesh's investment climate for Japanese firms.

He stressed improving data management, business efficiency and digitalisation aligned with international standards to reduce delays.

Uegaki highlighted the importance of economic partnership agreements (EPAs) to ease import-export processes and support smoother operations.

Policy consistency, he added, remains critical to ensure long-term investor confidence and signal a stable, business-friendly environment.

Tareq Rafi Bhuiyan, president of the Japan-Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said the EPA would ensure continued market access to Japan and strengthen investor confidence through a rules-based framework.

The Bangladesh-Japan EPA is being seen as critical to sustaining trade and investment as Bangladesh prepares for LDC graduation, he said. "Investors value predictability and long-term trust," he noted, adding that reforms must align with EPA commitments to attract sustained Japanese investment.

Also speaking at the event, Rashed Al Mahmud Titumir, the prime minister's adviser on finance and planning, pointed out priorities to deepen Bangladesh-Japan economic ties and shift focus from aid to investment-led growth.

He said Bangladesh wants higher Japanese investment to match global averages, with a stronger emphasis on manufacturing to create sustainable jobs.

He also stressed the need for greater technology transfer through joint ventures, enabling long-term industrial capacity and competitiveness. Titumir added that the government is committed to policy reforms, including deregulation, stronger market-based oversight, and improved contract enforcement to build investor confidence.

Ashik Chowdhury, executive chairman of the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (Bida), outlined a set of reforms aimed at attracting sustained foreign investment, particularly from Japanese firms.

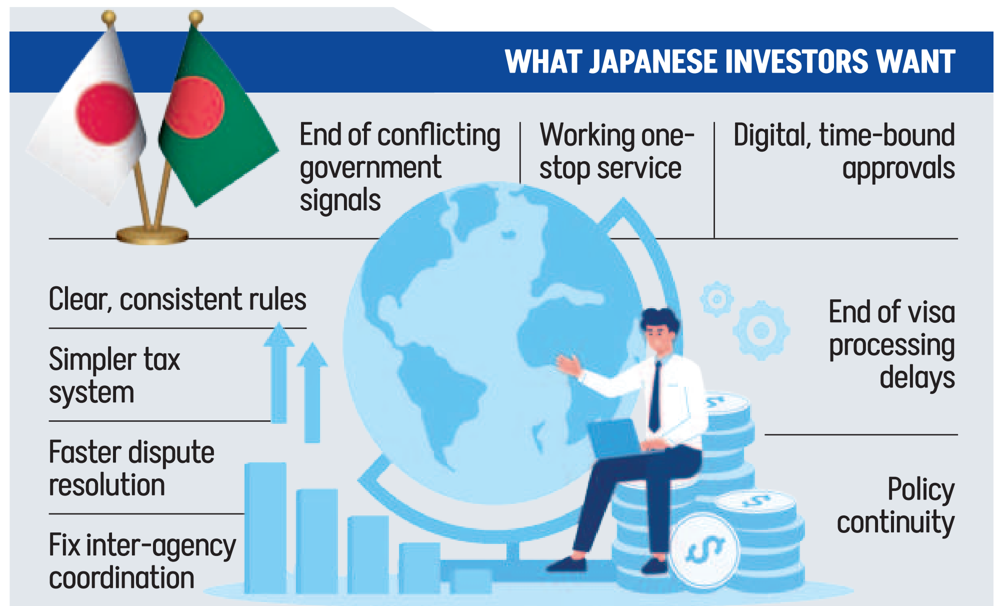
He said improving the business climate would require making tax administration more transparent and efficient, reducing the burden of unpredictable enforcement. He also stressed the need for stronger coordination among government agencies to avoid conflicting directives that often delay operations.

Chowdhury called for a fully functional "one-stop service" to streamline licensing through digitalisation and ensure visa processing within a predictable timeframe. Policy consistency, he added, remains crucial for long-term corporate planning and boosting investor confidence.

Japanese Ambassador to Bangladesh Shinichi Saida described the recently signed bilateral EPA as a landmark step, urging Bangladesh to view it through a long-term lens rather than immediate gains.

He said the deal offers legal certainty for investors and reinforces a rules-based trade environment at a time of global uncertainty.

Meanwhile, presenting the findings of a survey on business conditions of Japanese firms, Kazuiki Kataoka, country representative of Jetro, said Bangladesh is emerging as a promising frontier for Japanese businesses, with stronger profit expectations and growing interest in expansion.



He noted that 56.9 percent of Japanese firms in Bangladesh plan to expand operations, driven largely by the country's rising domestic market.

He also pointed to administrative inefficiencies and policy uncertainty as major risks, stressing that improving these areas could unlock greater foreign investment.

Syed Nasim Manzur, managing director of Apex Footwear Limited, said Bangladesh should position itself as a manufacturing hub, exporting to Japan and integrating into global value chains.

Leveraging the EPA, he added, could deepen long-term partnerships and boost trade and services.

M Masrur Reaz, chairman and CEO of Policy Exchange of Bangladesh (PEB), said Bangladesh's prospects under the proposed economic partnership with Japan remain promising, but some weaknesses could blunt its gains.

He said weak inter-agency collaboration, fragmented public-private dialogue, and limited private-sector linkages undermine policy execution and investment climate reforms.

Pharma sector needs urgent reforms

MD ABU ZAFOR SADEK

Among the knowledge-driven industries that have placed Bangladesh on the global stage, the pharmaceutical sector stands out as one of its most notable success stories. Compared with many low and middle-income countries, Bangladesh has struck a strong balance between affordability, quality and accessibility of medicines. This progress has strengthened public health security while positioning the country as a reliable global supplier of generic drugs.

From the mid-1980s to the pre-Covid period, the industry maintained annual growth of 15-25 percent. This expansion was fuelled by supportive government policies and the entrepreneurial drive of local firms. During and after the pandemic, however, the sector faced mounting challenges. Global shortages of raw materials, rising input and freight costs, depreciation of the taka against the US dollar, and higher fuel prices pushed up production and distribution expenses.

At the same time, limited flexibility in price adjustments and delays in drug registration intensified operational pressure. Maintaining profitability while ensuring an uninterrupted supply has therefore become increasingly difficult.

In this context, the new government has an opportunity to introduce timely and pragmatic reforms to protect both industry sustainability and public access to medicines. A key priority is to accelerate and modernise the drug registration process.

The introduction of new molecules is essential for sustaining growth in the generic market, often contributing 15-20 percent of overall expansion. New products also improve treatment protocols and broaden therapeutic options. Despite efforts by regulators, the approval process remains slow, as expert committee meetings are held only a few times a year.

Increasing the frequency of meetings, enabling virtual consultations, and establishing multiple committees based on therapeutic classes could improve efficiency. Full digitalisation through an online registration portal would further enhance transparency and reduce processing times.

Another area requiring reform is the pricing mechanism. Excessive price controls and complex approval procedures can disrupt supply and discourage investment. A transparent, evidence-based pricing framework involving all stakeholders would help ensure sustainability for both manufacturers and consumers. Introducing fixed timelines for price approval decisions would improve predictability and strengthen regulatory confidence.

Similarly, recently introduced production quotas for essential medicines may not be feasible for all companies. If national supply is already sufficient, such mandates risk creating inefficiencies and market distortions. Facilitating the import of raw materials and laboratory chemicals is equally important. Pharmaceutical production and quality control depend on timely imports, yet multiple approval requirements often cause delays. As many inputs have limited shelf lives, prolonged clearance reduces usability and raises costs.

The Active Pharmaceutical Ingredient Industrial (API) Park in Gazaria, Munshiganj, also requires urgent attention. Several companies have invested heavily but are still waiting for essential utilities and infrastructure.

At the policy level, Bangladesh's graduation from LDC status presents both opportunity and risk. Under the TRIPS agreement of the WTO, Bangladesh currently benefits from flexibility in producing and distributing patented medicines. This has enabled access to high-cost and biologic drugs at affordable prices.

These flexibilities will expire after graduation, potentially increasing medicine costs due to patent protections and royalty obligations. As innovation capacity for new molecules remains limited, diplomatic efforts to extend the transition period or secure alternative policy space will be crucial to maintaining affordable healthcare. Finally, Bangladesh can strengthen pharmaceutical exports through strategic commercial diplomacy.

Diplomatic missions can support product registration in foreign markets, facilitate regulatory coordination, and promote government-to-government agreements. With timely reforms and strategic policy adjustments, Bangladesh can unlock a new phase of growth in its pharmaceutical sector while safeguarding access to affordable medicines for all.

The writer is deputy general manager at UniMed UniHealth Pharmaceuticals

China's neighbours get cold shoulder on energy

REUTERS, *Beijing*

As energy stress spreads across Southeast Asia, governments across the region are asking China to deliver on its pledges of closer energy security cooperation by freeing up now-banned exports of fertiliser and fuel.

But so far China has offered only vague statements and has yet to even publicly acknowledge the export bans reported by Reuters and others as it focuses on insulating its own economy from the war in Iran.

Analysts don't expect that to change, pointing to the tension between China's stated ambition to be a bigger player in regional affairs and the realpolitik of its commitment to keep its own economy outpacing global growth.

China is the world's second largest fertiliser exporter and also a large supplier of fuel. For many countries in Asia including Bangladesh, the Philippines and even Australia, Chinese imports are a major source of supply, now cut off by its export bans.

Dhaka earlier this month asked China to honour existing fuel contracts, while Thai diplomats will engage Chinese counterparts to keep fertiliser shipments from China flowing if needed, officials in Bangkok said.

In Malaysia, officials said last week the Chinese export ban would worsen fertiliser rationing, including in its oil palm industry, the world's second-largest, and add a further blow on top of the war in Iran.

Even the Philippines has sought assistance despite the two countries' disputes over the South China Sea.

On March 17, the Philippines minister of agriculture visited China's embassy in Manila and said China had agreed to continue fertiliser shipments. Beijing's one-sentence readout said only that they had discussed agriculture.

The same day Australia, which imported a third of its jet fuel from China last year, said it was discussing jet fuel exports with Beijing.

"China may offer some ceremonial assistance, but it's highly unlikely, if not wholly improbable, that it will share any substantive amount of its food, energy, or other reserves with other countries," said Eric Olander, co-founder of the China-Global South Project.

In addition, we're talking about the impact of the war in the Middle East.

In fact, analysts said Chinese policymakers were likely quietly congratulating themselves on the strategic foresight to begin stockpiling since the early 2000s, a policy that may have seemed excessive in peacetime but now looks decidedly practical.

People's Daily, the Communist Party's flagship newspaper, trumpeted China's relative energy security in an editorial earlier this month and said the country's foresight meant China held the "energy lifeline" in its own hands.

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Vietnam textile firms strengthen resilience amid rising global risks

ANN/VIETNAM NEWS

Vietnamese textile and garment enterprises are steering through unpredictable global markets, rising transport costs and Middle East conflicts while securing orders, diversifying sources and eyeing domestic growth.

Unpredictable market developments and geopolitical conflicts in the Middle East have disrupted supply chains, driven up transportation and insurance costs and affected business operations.

In response, authorities have proactively implemented solutions to help textile and garment enterprises maintain stable production and business activities, sustaining growth momentum and boosting exports.

Many companies have already secured orders through July and are negotiating contracts for the rest of the year. Alongside diversifying markets and customers, businesses continue to invest in modern equipment and develop new products to enhance competitiveness.

Hoàng Mạnh Cầm, chief of office of the board of directors at Vietnam National Textile and Garment Group (Vinatex), told Nhân Dân newspaper that as soon as the conflict in the Middle East broke out, companies quickly developed strategies such as securing raw material supplies, diversifying sourcing and customer bases and avoiding dependence on limited clients.

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A riskier Mideast will drive Big Oil toward new frontiers

REUTERS, *Houston*

Oil companies will have to look further afield for new fossil fuel resources now that the Iran war has dented the investment allure of the energy-rich Middle East. Higher oil prices will give them that chance.

Major international oil companies, including Exxon Mobil, Chevron, TotalEnergies, Shell and BP, have long been drawn to the Middle East by its vast resources, stable fiscal terms and, until recently, relative political stability. The region accounts for roughly a fifth of global oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) production.

That reputation, built painstakingly over decades even as wars raged in Iraq and Yemen, has now been shattered by the US-Israeli war with Iran.

Now in its fifth week, the conflict has put energy infrastructure squarely in the crosshairs. Dozens of facilities across the Gulf have been damaged, including Qatar's giant LNG hub and several major oil refineries.

The closure of the Strait of Hormuz – through which roughly 20 percent of the world's oil and gas normally flows – has forced producers to shut oilfields, costing the region an estimated $1 billion a day in lost export revenues, according to Reuters calculations based on pre-war prices.

The longer-term costs will be far higher. Restarting operations and repairing damaged facilities will likely run into the tens of billions of dollars – if not far more. QatarEnergy said an Iranian missile strike on February 18 could cost it about $20 billion a year in lost revenue and take up to five years to repair.

But no amount of money may be able to repair the region's reputational damage – at least not in the short term – and that is likely to rapidly reshape Western energy majors' upstream strategies.

The Middle East will clearly remain a major source of oil and gas for decades. It holds about half of the world's proven oil reserves and 40 percent of gas reserves. Western companies are thus unlikely to abandon it altogether.

General view of Saudi Aramco's Ras Tanura oil refinery and oil terminal in Saudi Arabia. The Middle East holds about half of the world's proven oil reserves and 40 percent of gas reserves. PHOTO: REUTERS/FILE

It currently makes up a substantial portion of many majors' portfolios, including 41 percent of Exxon's reserves, 42 percent of TotalEnergies' and a quarter of Shell's, according to consultancy Welligence. The region attracted around $130 billion in oil and gas investment in 2025, roughly 15 percent of the global total, according to the International Energy Agency.

But unless the Iran war ends with a new, non-belligerent government sitting in Tehran – an outcome that currently appears remote – the conflict will leave deep scars. Uncertainty over the safety of transit through Hormuz and the higher risk of conflagration is apt to sharply boost the cost of deploying staff, equipment, insurance and capital in the Middle East, making the region a lot less attractive for exploration.

This rising risk premium in the world's largest energy-producing region is already being reflected in long-term oil prices.

Since the eve of the conflict, the average Brent crude price expected in 2030 has jumped about 10 percent to roughly $72 a barrel. Once the full extent of the damage from the war is known, that could rise even further.

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