

Robi's Q1 profit jumps 85% on AI-driven offers

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Robi Axiata posted a sharp rise in profit in the first quarter of 2026, as AI-driven personalised offers and disciplined cost management cushioned the impact of adverse economic conditions.

The country's second-largest mobile operator's profit after tax rose 85 percent year-on-year (YoY) to Tk 232.3 crore in the January-March quarter, the company said in a statement released yesterday.

Revenue reached Tk 2,531.2 crore, up 8.1 percent YoY. Earnings per share stood at Tk 0.44, up 85.2 percent, it added.

EBITDA (earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortisation) reached Tk 1,350.3 crore with a 53.3 percent margin, reflecting 21.6 percent YoY growth. The EBITDA margin expanded 5.9 percentage points over the same period.

According to Robi, the EBITDA growth indicates the company's high level of discipline in cost management, producing desired results.

The operator's active subscriber base during the period stood at 5.74 crore

Capital expenditures stood at Tk 349.5 crore at the end of the quarter. Total payments to the government exchequer reached Tk 2,073.6 crore, accounting for 82 percent of quarterly revenue.

The telecom operator's active subscriber base during the period stood at 5.74 crore. Data and 4G subscribers numbered 4.45 crore and 4.03 crore respectively.

Average monthly data consumption per user rose 15.4 percent YoY to 8.95 GB, and 6.1 percent quarter-on-quarter.

The operator stated that it had over 19,300 4G sites at the end of Q1, covering 98.98 percent of the population.

Quarter-on-quarter, revenue dipped 2.1 percent, which the company attributed to fewer calendar days during the period.

"We have registered 8.1 percent YoY growth under very adverse socio-economic conditions intensified by the war in West Asia [Middle East]," said Managing Director and CEO Ziad Shatara.

"Our AI-driven personalised offers, supported by sustained investment in network improvement, are producing the desired result," he added.



PHOTO: MD ASADUZ ZAMAN

Workers operate in organised rows at Barendra Rajshahi Textile Limited, formerly Rajshahi Textile Mills, revived by PRAN-RFL Group under a public-private partnership, creating thousands of local jobs and producing export-oriented goods. The photo was taken recently.

Thousands get jobs as PRAN-RFL revives abandoned mills

MD ASADUZ ZAMAN, back from Rajshahi

A few years ago, Champa Begum moved from Rajshahi to Gazipur for factory work, leaving behind her young daughter. Today, the 30-year-old no longer has to make that choice.

Begum now works at a factory barely 12 km from her home in Paba upazila, Rajshahi. The move back home has reduced living costs and allowed her to rebuild her daily life with family.

Her story reflects a broader change underway. PRAN-RFL Group has restarted three idle state-owned factories in Rajshahi, including Rajshahi Textile Mill and Rajshahi Jute Mill, under a public-private partnership (PPP) model. The initiative has already employed many locals, with plans to scale up, reducing the need for migration to major cities.

Workers say the opportunity to work close to home has brought both economic relief and personal stability.

Export goods — non-leather footwear and luggage — are being produced at the revived factories. Officials said utilising idle state-owned mills and land could boost foreign exchange earnings despite sectoral constraints.

A NEW LIFE

Nearly 2,500 workers have secured jobs following the revival of the once abandoned Rajshahi Textile Mill, which began operations in 1979 but shut down in 2003 due to mounting losses. After more than two decades of inactivity, the factory has resumed production under a private-sector initiative to revive idle facilities through PPPs.

The factories now produce non-leather footwear, luggage, backpacks, trolleys, and women's handbags. Over the past two years, RFL has invested approximately Tk 325 crore in the footwear and luggage sectors, with another Tk 200 crore planned this year and a further Tk 800 crore targeted over the next three years.

PRAN-RFL has already created 4,500 jobs across the three Rajshahi factories and plans

to expand to more than 11,000. Nationwide, the company has generated around 12,000 jobs in footwear and luggage over the past two years and aims to create an additional 30,000 over the next three years.

Currently producing around 48 lakh pairs of shoes per month, the company plans to scale up to 1.5 crore pairs within three years to meet growing global demand. Rising production costs in China are prompting buyers to shift sourcing to Bangladesh, particularly for non-leather footwear.

The global footwear market is valued at \$400 to \$500 billion. In FY2024-25, Bangladesh exported footwear worth \$1.19 billion, with non-leather footwear contributing \$522 million — growing over 25 percent year-on-year, according to the Export Promotion Bureau.

Nearly 2,500 workers have secured jobs following the revival of the once-abandoned Rajshahi Textile Mill

JOBS WHERE THEY ARE NEEDED

For workers like Champa Begum, the impact of such an initiative is immediate and personal.

"If we work far away, the child's education suffers," she said. "It's much better when jobs are available locally," she said.

Others share similar experiences. Rajshahi University graduate Sultana Khatun, 32, said the opportunity to work locally came at the right time.

"Amid higher inflation, this has somewhat reduced the burden on us."

Mustafa K Mujeri, executive director of the Institute for Inclusive Finance and Development, welcomed the move to open up state-owned mills for private sector acquisition and reopening.

"Such measures are urgently needed to address the country's unemployment challenge," he said.

Amid persistently high inflation, the government should strike a balance between strengthening social protection and actively supporting the private sector to expand job creation, he noted.

Without a stronger push for employment generation, he warned, macroeconomic pressures could further deepen labour market vulnerabilities.

DECENTRALISING INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT

PRAN-RFL operates eight footwear and luggage factories across Narsingdi, Rajshahi, Rangpur, and Pabna, with two more facilities in Chattogram under renovation.

The group exports to 45 countries, with the United States and Europe as key markets. Export earnings from non-leather footwear and luggage rose to Tk 177 crore in FY25 from Tk 92 crore the previous year — an increase of over 90 percent.

"We are receiving strong purchase orders, but failure to deliver on time means losing opportunities. Reviving closed factories is our fast-track solution," said Kamruzzaman Kamal, marketing director at PRAN-RFL Group.

He added that utilising idle government jute mills and unused land nationwide could significantly boost foreign exchange earnings.

RFL's Rahat Hossain Roni said Bangladesh's large rural workforce gives it a competitive advantage over rivals such as Vietnam and Cambodia, which are well-positioned to absorb production shifting out of China.

On wages, he said the company complies with national minimum standards and offers productivity-linked incentives.

"The fixed salary is just the entry-level; beyond that, earnings increase with performance," he said.

He also noted that workers returning from Dhaka benefit from higher purchasing power in smaller cities.

"If someone comes from Dhaka to Rajshahi at the same wage, they've already gained roughly 30 percent in purchasing power."

The price of saying no

MAHTAB UDDIN AHMED

There is an old corporate truth in Bangladesh: everyone admires integrity until it begins to disturb someone important. As long as an honest chief executive is improving numbers, tightening discipline, and speaking politely in board meetings, he is praised. The moment he blocks a favoured appointment or refuses to bend rules for a powerful recommendation, he suddenly becomes immature, inflexible, and poor at "stakeholder management". In our banking sector, character is often celebrated in speeches and punished in practice.

Recently, I met a young acting chief executive of a financial institution. He was bright, humble, energetic and full of ideas. He wanted to transform the institution with new rigour. Yet I sensed tension in his body language. Later, I understood why. Pressure was mounting on him to accommodate an appointment he did not believe was right. He resisted. In doing so, he stood up for principle. In Bangladesh's financial sector, that is sometimes a touching but costly habit.

He probably believed his board, satisfied with his performance, would support him. That was his first lesson. In difficult moments, the first institution to discover flexibility is often the board itself. Directors who praise professionalism in the afternoon can become admirers of compromise by evening. A chief executive may think performance is his shield. In reality, that shield often melts under the first serious phone call from the right quarter.

I have written before about why chief executives do not stand together when one of them comes under pressure from a board or powerful owners. The answer is painfully simple. They are too busy surviving. There are nearly a hundred chief executives across banks and non-bank financial institutions, yet if one is



cornered for doing the right thing, nobody truly stands beside him. Some offer private sympathy. Some gently mock him for being foolish. Others suggest he should have been more practical, which in our corporate language often means less honest. The lesson lands only when the pressure shifts to their own door.

I do not recall bankers' associations becoming a memorable defender of such professionals either. They are visible at seminars, policy dialogues, gala dinners and group photographs. But when a professional banker is squeezed for resisting interference, the hall suddenly falls silent. Silence remains one of the safest leadership strategies in the country.

This is not merely a sad story about one executive. It is a warning about the sector's health. It tells every chief executive that the real job is not banking but balancing integrity against pressure. It tells internal auditors, compliance officers and risk managers that their reports matter less than influence. It tells depositors that governance is often decorative in annual reports, while decisions are made elsewhere. Most dangerously, it signals to corrupt owners and enablers that the machinery protecting them is still intact.

The damage goes beyond a single appointment or resignation. It weakens institutional confidence. Honest professionals learn that courage can end careers. Boards learn that convenience is easier than principle. Young bankers learn that silence is safer than judgment. The result is predictable: weak governance, timid management, compromised oversight, and ultimately public loss.

The central bank must act more firmly. Fit and proper tests for directors should be real, not ceremonial. Businesspeople with material conflicts must be kept off boards. Independent directors must be genuinely independent, not familiar names in new roles. Internal audit, compliance and whistleblowing systems must be protected from board capture. Most importantly, accountability must extend not only to owners and directors but also to executives who enable abuse through silence or cooperation.

Until then, the banking sector will continue this tragic comedy. Integrity will be praised at conferences, punished in practice, and quietly pushed to the margins. Good people will resign, or learn quickly how not to be good.

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

India plans to bolster key export scheme

REUTERS

India is planning to raise spending on its key scheme designed to refund local taxes paid on export goods and extend the programme's tenure by five years, two government officials said, as the Middle East war clouds the county's trade outlook.

The scheme, currently valid until September 30 with a budget of a little over \$1 billion, reimburses exporters for taxes and levies paid to federal, state and local authorities that are not refunded under other programmes, to make export goods more competitive.

But India's annual budget released in February nearly halved financial allocation for the scheme for the fiscal year 2026/27.

Talks to bolster the scheme follow a series of challenges faced by exporters in the Asian nation which are facing cash-flow strains due to prohibitively high freight rates around risk-fraught Gulf routes, after braving US President Donald Trump's steep tariffs for months.

The Middle East conflict weakened trade in March, with India's merchandise exports falling 7.4 percent year-on-year and 24 of 30 major export categories declining. Shipments to key trading partners in the region, including United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, fell sharply.

The share of exports in India's GDP has been increasingly steadily to nearly a fifth.

The nation's finance ministry and commerce ministry are discussing reinforcing the Remission of Duties and Taxes on Export Products (RoDTEP) scheme, the officials said.

Asia's refined fuel exports plunge amid Hormuz closure

REUTERS Launceston

While prices for crude oil futures have surged and slumped in line with the latest headlines about the war between the United States and Iran, the impact of the crisis in physical markets for refined fuels has been worsening.

Another hint of a peace agreement was enough to send Brent contracts down 7.8 percent on Wednesday to a close of \$101.27 a barrel, even though a full and sustained re-opening of the Strait of Hormuz still seems a long way off.

In the meantime, the effective closure of the narrow waterway through which about 20 percent of the world's crude and refined products moved prior to the February 28 attack on Iran by the United States and Israel is cutting volumes of refined products being shipped around Asia.

Exports of refined products such as jet fuel, diesel and gasoline fell to multi-year lows in Asia, the top energy consuming region and destination for about 80 percent of pre-war cargoes through the Strait of Hormuz.

The combined export volumes for these three fuel types in April in Asia was almost 3 million barrels per day (bpd) below the average for the three months prior to the start of the conflict.

Jet fuel remains the part of the barrel most under pressure, with Asia's exports of the fuel slumping to 596,000 bpd in April, down from an average of 1.54 million bpd in the three months prior to the start of the war, according to data compiled by commodity analysts Kpler.

The April figure was the lowest in Kpler

records dating back to 2017 and shows that flows are only about one-third of pre-conflict levels.

The bulk of Asia's exports of jet fuel head to other Asian countries that are importers, with smaller volumes heading to Africa, Europe and North America.

India's exports of jet fuel dropped to

48,600 bpd in April, down from pre-war levels of 141,000 bpd, while China's dropped to 135,000 bpd from about 308,000 bpd.

The United Arab Emirates went from shipping an average of 106,000 bpd of jet fuel in the three months prior to the war to zero in April, according to Kpler.

The paucity of jet fuel cargoes is reflected in prices, with Singapore assessments ending at \$158.91 a barrel on Wednesday, up 70 percent from the close of \$93.45 on February 27, the day before the US and Israel launched their aerial campaign against Iran.

Diesel is another pressure point in Asia, with the price of its building block gasoil ending at \$141.30 a barrel on Wednesday, up 55 percent from the pre-war level.

Asia's exports of the transport fuel dropped to a nine-year low of 2.22 million bpd in April, down from an average of 3.54 million bpd in the three months before the start of the Iran war, according to Kpler.

Among regional exporters, Japan's shipments plunged to 32,600 bpd in April from pre-conflict levels of 148,600 bpd, South Korea's slipped to 451,000 bpd from 507,000 bpd, India's dropped to 371,000 bpd from 494,000 bpd while China's dropped to 22,000 bpd from 126,300 bpd.



A small tanker sails near an oil refinery in the Keihin Industrial Zone in Kawasaki, south of Tokyo. PHOTO: REUTERS/FILE