Business

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Will foreign firms run all four Chattogram port terminals?

Government weighs giving the last locally run container terminal to a Saudi firm, as critics warn of losing control over the premier port

DWAIPAYAN BARUA, *Ctg*

With three of Chattogram port's container terminals already handed over to foreign operators, the government is now in the process of handing the Chittagong Container Terminal to another one, potentially the Saudi-based Red Sea Gateway Terminal International.

If the deal goes ahead, foreign companies will run all four container terminals of the port, which handles about 92 percent of Bangladesh's $115 billion trade. It would be a major shift, ending domestic firms running the terminals.

The four container terminals are Patenga Container Terminal (PCT), the greenfield Laldia Container Terminal (LCT), New Mooring Container Terminal (NCT) and Chittagong Container Terminal (CCT).

As the terminals have passed one by one to foreign firms, labour leaders, workers and political activists say that the shift could weaken state control over the country's premier port, cut revenue, cost workers their jobs and raise security concerns at a strategic gateway.

Some economists and business leaders, however, have welcomed the move as a way to make the port more efficient, while urging the authorities to ensure transparency and fairness.

Of the four container terminals of the port, Red Sea Gateway became operator of Patenga in 2023. Denmark's APM Terminals won the contract to develop and run Laldia in 2025.

This month, UAE-based DP World secured the management of the New Mooring Terminal, the port's largest container terminal. The deal was signed after months of protests by port workers and activists, who said it would undermine the country's security and national interests.

The authorities in 2025 handed the Pangaon Inland Container Terminal in Keraniganj, on Dhaka's outskirts, to Swiss operator Medlog SA. This terminal is also managed by the Chittagong Port Authority.

SHIPPING MINISTRY PUSHES SAUDI FIRM FOR CCT

The issue about foreign operator appointment came to light after the shipping ministry asked Invest Bangladesh to begin appointing Red Sea Gateway as Chittagong Container Terminal's operator.

In a letter on September 28, the ministry directed the agency, formerly the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority, to start the process.

However, Shipping Secretary Md Zakaria told The Daily Star on Sunday that no decision had yet been taken.

He said Invest Bangladesh informed the ministry about Red Sea Gateway's proposal to operate the terminal. The ministry then passed it to the Chittagong Port Authority, which is responsible for signing the deal, for review and comment.

"We are yet to get any reply from the port authority," he said, adding that the ministry would ask the Public Private Partnership Authority (PPPA) to start the process once the port authority responded positively.

Officials familiar with the matter said the ministry has also directed the port authority on the issue.

Chattogram port has four operational terminal facilities for both containerised and non-containerised cargoes. The oldest, General Cargo Berth (GCB), has 12 jetties, six of which handle bulk cargo vessels and the other six handle container ships.

The port's first two dedicated container jetties under Chittagong Container Terminal (CCT) were built in 1986. But it took more than two decades before the terminal got essential equipment such as quayside gantry cranes.

In 2005, four such cranes were installed. Since 2006, local firm Saif Powertec Limited has been running the

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Ctg port clearance slows as post-declaration delays double

MOHAMMAD SUMAN, *Chattogram*

Clearing containerised imports through Chattogram port now takes an average of 13.2 days, up nearly 17 percent in four years, according to the latest study by the National Board of Revenue (NBR).

The increase comes as the four stages following customs declaration, from assessment to cargo delivery, now take nearly twice as long as they did in 2022, according to the Time Release Study (TRS), conducted in April this year.

The average clearance time was 11.3 days in 2022. The slowdown comes despite importers taking less time to file customs declarations, the longest stage of the process, shows the findings of the study, which analysed nearly 3,200 bills of entry.

That stage, the filing of the bill of entry, takes an average of 7.4 days, counted from the filing of the Import General Manifest (IGM). The IGM is a list of cargo carried by a vessel, filed with customs while the goods are still on board.

The same stage took 8.4 days in 2022, according to the 2022 study, which was based on about 600 bills of entry.

The one-day gain was outweighed by the four stages that follow. They now take a combined 5.8 days, up from 2.9 days in 2022, or twice as long.

According to the study, customs assessment takes an average of two days after a bill of entry is submitted. Payment of duties and taxes through banks takes another 1.8 days. Importers then spend 1.1 days completing formalities for an exit note at the port gate, followed by a further 0.9 days to receive their goods.

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Middle East conflict threatens vegetable exports further

SUKANTA HALDER

Bangladesh's fresh vegetable export earnings fell nearly 7 percent year-on-year in the July-September quarter of the current fiscal year as higher airfreight costs and food-safety concerns squeezed exporters.

Exporters fear that the situation could worsen in the current October-December quarter as flight disruptions involving Saudi Arabia, a major destination, threaten to further complicate the movement of perishable produce.

Following a series of reported Houthi attacks in early October, restrictions at the Saudi Arabian airports have affected 134 flights involving Bangladesh, according to the latest figures from the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB).

Bangladesh earned $24.01 million from vegetable exports in the first three months of FY2026-27, down from $25.79 million in the same period a year earlier, according to data from the Export Promotion Bureau (EPB).

Exporters said higher freight charges, flight disruptions, excessive pesticide residues in produce and inadequate cooling facilities at airports were making it harder for Bangladeshi vegetables to compete in overseas markets.

Chowdhury Anower, organising secretary of the Bangladesh Fruits, Vegetables and Allied Products Exporters' Association, said Bangladesh's vegetable exports primarily went to Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries, as well as Europe.

He said conflicts in the Middle East had disrupted shipments, leaving exporters struggling to divert produce to alternative destinations. Unpredictable airfreight rates, rising labour costs and higher carton prices were also putting pressure on exporters.

Airfreight spot rates from South Asia to the Middle East remained 91 percent above their late-February levels in the week of September 21-27, according to freight intelligence firm Xeneta.

In its October 1 market update, Xeneta said global air cargo spot rates averaged $3.10 per kilogram in September, up 27 percent year-on-year and 2 percent from August. Demand growth outpaced capacity expansion, while higher fuel costs added to pressure on rates.

Anower said freight rates in Bangladesh were higher than those in neighbouring countries,

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Govt plans Tk 592cr project for two Titas wells

BSS

The government plans to drill two new wells at the Titas Gas Field at a cost of Tk 592 crore to increase domestic gas production by around 30 million cubic feet per day (mmcfd).

The project, titled "Drilling of Two Appraisal-cum-Development Wells (Titas-32 and Titas-33) at Titas Gas Field", will be placed before the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (ECNEC) for approval at a meeting scheduled for October 25, an official familiar with the process told BSS yesterday.

ECNEC Chairman and Prime Minister Tarique Rahman will preside over the meeting at the Bangladesh Secretariat.

Bangladesh Gas Fields Company Limited (BGFCL), a subsidiary of Petrobangla, will implement the project under the Energy and Mineral Resources Division of the Ministry of Power, Energy and Mineral Resources from October 2026 to September 2029, a Petrobangla official said.

Of the estimated cost, Tk 414.40 crore will come from government funds and Tk 177.60 crore from BGFCL's own funds, the official added.

Petrobangla Chairman Abdul Mannan told BSS that the two wells are expected to produce around 30 mmcfd of gas, along with condensate.

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Robi, Banglalink users can spend Tk 50,000 yearly via mobile balances

MAHMUDUL HASAN

The Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) has approved a 150 percent increase in Direct Operator Billing (DOB) transaction limits for Robi Axiata and Banglalink. Customers of the two operators can now spend up to Tk 5,000 a month and Tk 50,000 a year on eligible digital products and services using their mobile balances.

The approval was granted at a recent commission meeting and will remain in effect for six months from July 20, 2026. The move brings the two operators under the higher limits previously approved for Grameenphone.

According to BTRC documents, the commission gave retrospective approval for the revised limits, subject to conditions outlined in a letter sent to Robi and Banglalink on September 13. The two operators had applied for the higher limits on August 25.

The commission said the decision was taken to ensure fair competition in the market. Allowing only Grameenphone to offer the higher limits could have given the dominant operator an unfair advantage, despite its status as a significant market power operator.

DOB allows customers to pay for specified digital products and services directly from their mobile phone balances. It offers an alternative to bank accounts and credit cards, making digital purchases easier for people who do not have access to these payment methods.

Under the revised limits, customers can also buy eligible smartphones, SIM-based modems and routers outright or in instalments, alongside other permitted digital products and services.

However, the higher limits do not allow customers to use their mobile balances as unrestricted digital money.

The higher limits let Robi and Banglalink users pay for eligible digital products, including smartphones, modems and routers, through mobile balances

Operators must comply with applicable Bangladesh Bank (BB) instructions and obtain approval under the revised guidelines for prepaid payment instruments once they are issued. They must also follow the Payment and Settlement System Act, 2024, the Money Laundering Prevention Act, 2012, and the Anti-Terrorism Act, 2009.

Customers using DOB must complete know-your-customer (KYC) procedures in line with Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit requirements.

The rules prohibit DOB payments for virtual currencies used in social media applications and games, including coins, points, credits, coupons, diamonds and gems.

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