

Farm sector in a fix over WTO regime

Experts, NGO representatives observe

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Bangladesh's agriculture sector is facing a setback due to WTO's globalisation framework of agreement on agriculture, agro-experts and NGO representatives observed yesterday at a consultation meeting.

They said the government and other organisations in the sector have failed to initiate adequate promotional measures for agriculture that could be undertaken within the World Trade Organisation (WTO) framework.

The meeting was organised jointly by the Coalition of Local NGOs, Bangladesh and INCIDIN Bangladesh, a non-government organisation, at the National Press Club in Dhaka.

"The WTO regulates the world's agro-business and often defies the nations' sovereign choice to sustain national interests," said INCIDIN executive director AKM Masud Ali presenting keynote speech in the meeting.

"Arrangements to treat agriculture in the developed world and that in the least developed countries under the same framework is just a farce, which makes the latter to lose an uneven competition," Ali added.

He further said WTO's entire text of the agreement on agriculture is full of tricky and vague wordings which deprive the poor countries of their right to do their agro-businesses in a fair competition.

While the government has not been able to initiate agriculture promotional measures under the WTO's Green Box provisions, Bangladesh's agricultural sector is now being controlled by the corporate organisations like WTO, World Bank and International Monetary Fund, Ali observed in his presentation.

He said the marginalised farmers of a poor country like Bangladesh are being washed away in a heavy flow of open market economy and globalisation, and the nation is being deceived in the international agricultural deal.

Prof M Amir Hossain of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Agricultural University, Gazipur said there has to be a movement to retain national interest in agriculture sector through a process of continuous programmes.

"To achieve self-reliance in agriculture, we have to bring human resources, natural resources and time resources under a coordinated framework," said Rahamat Ali MP, agricultural secretary of Awami League.

The discussants stressed the need for subsidy in agriculture sector in the least developed countries and ensuring special and differential advantages for them in the WTO framework of agreement on agriculture.

The commitment of withdrawing subsidy from developed world's agriculture sector has to be implemented and the small-scale agro-based production should be kept out of agricultural business deal, they said.

Aktel mobile to get 'Ashal phone' facilities

Aktel cell phone subscribers having mobile to mobile connectivity can get the facilities offered under the pre-paid 'Ashal phone' package.

Under 'Eid Special Offer' of TM International Bangladesh, operating company of Aktel, users will be able to enjoy the facilities of having both way connectivity with mobile and land phones worldwide, says a press release.

Customers have to pay required entry fees to get the facilities, which is beginning from first quarter of 2004.

'Ashal phone' is the only pre-paid standard package introduced in Bangladesh for the first time having both way connectivity with mobile and land phones worldwide.

By the end of this year, 61 districts will be under Aktel network coverage, the press release added.

Call money rate jumps to 10.5pc

BSS, Dhaka

After a periodic lull, the call money rate jumped to its high at 10.50 per cent in inter-bank money market on Monday as some private banks faced pressure on their liquidity, fund managers said.

The rate touched to its intra-high at 10.50 per cent in a few deals among banks and non-bank financial institutions and in most deals, ranged between 4.00 per cent and 9.50 per cent, fund managers of leading commercial banks said.

The call money rate remained very low since long in line with the central bank's monetary policy to force banks to cut their interest rates.

Global Online gets ISO-9001

Global Online Services Limited (GOSL), a leading Internet service provider, has received ISO-9001:2000 Quality Management System (QMS) certification.

The certification was given by the ISOQAR, an UK-based neutral organisation, recently, says a press release.

ISOQAR Director (Operation) Aqib Bashir formally handed over the certificate to Chairman of the GOSL Syed Faruque Ahmed at a ceremony held in Dhaka on Saturday.

The ISOQAR granted the certificate by reviewing the GOSL management, marketing and the overall modern, high technology oriented policy and functioning of the company.

GOSL, a concern of Texas Group, has been providing corporate Internet services since 1997.

Repo auction

UNB, Dhaka

The Repo auction of Bangladesh Bank for commercial banks and financial institutions was held here yesterday.

Eleven bids of one-day tenor amounting to Tk 517.24 crore and one bid of seven-day tenor amounting to Tk 50 crore were received, of which one-day tenor amounting to Tk 308.50 crore and seven-day tenor amounting to Tk 25 crore were accepted.

The rates of interest against the accepted bids for one-day and seven-day tenor ranged between 5.25 and 4.62 per cent and 5.01 per cent per annum respectively, said a Bangladesh Bank press release.

Comdex 2003 to restore confidence in hi-tech sector

AFP, Las Vegas, Nevada

With the US economy beginning to bounce back, this year's annual computer trade show, Comdex, could mark a return to confidence for the battered sector after three dismal years.

The show, which runs through Thursday, will host 550 exhibitors, three-fourths of them American, and just 50,000 visitors, according to organizer MediaLive International.

Most all those attending are professional technology purchasers, out shopping for wireless technologies while balancing privacy and pocket-book concerns.

US businesses anticipate increasing their information technology budgets by less than two per cent in 2004, according to a recent poll by Forrester Research.

DSE to refer Beximco Synthetics debenture default dispute to SEC

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Dissatisfied with Beximco Synthetics' explanation of the status of its payment against debenture liabilities, Dhaka Stock Exchange (DSE) will now refer the case to Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) for legal action.

In response to DSE's November 15 letter, Beximco Synthetics yesterday explained its position following a claim by two institutional investors that the company was yet to pay them about Tk 10 crore in liabilities against debentures.

But the company's explanation could not convince the bourse authorities. "We are not happy with the explanation of the company about the mat-

ter," DSE Chief Executive Officer Salahuddin Ahmed Khan said yesterday.

"The company's declaration that its debenture was fully redeemed was a misinformation," he said. DSE will now apprise the SEC of the situation pointing out rules violated by the company. This will help the regulators take action, he said.

Meanwhile, SEC on Sunday also asked the Beximco Synthetics to explain within a week its position on the claim by the institutional investors -- Investment Corporation of Bangladesh (ICB) and Bangladesh Shilpa Rin Shangstha (BSRS).

SEC Chairman Mirza Azizul Islam

said SEC would take decision on the matter after receiving the company's reply. The commission is now investigating the matter in consultation with DSE, he said.

"We are also cross-checking information furnished by the company with that of ICB and BSRS to solve the issue as early as possible," he said.

Officials of Beximco Synthetics could not be contacted for comment.

DSE in a letter on Saturday asked Beximco Synthetics to immediately explain its position following the company's declaration that its debenture was fully redeemed which means it has cleared all liabilities.

Earlier, Beximco Synthetics in a

letter to DSE said the company had paid all the liabilities against debenture. The company's declaration on payment against debenture was published on the DSE website on October 9.

Contradicting the statement, ICB, trustee of the debenture, and BSRS, a major investor in the debenture, came up with the allegations of non-payment. The ICB said it is yet to receive Tk 5 crore dues from Beximco Synthetics while BSRS said its dues of Tk 4.5 crore are yet to be cleared by the company.

Beximco Synthetics floated 150,000 debentures with a face value of Tk 173 per debenture in 1993 at 14 per cent interest rate. The debenture matured on September 9 this year.

CSE election today

UNB, Chittagong

Election to the Board of Directors of Chittagong Stock Exchange will be held today.

Six candidates are vying for four seats in the board this year. They are Abu Sayed Mohammad Shahidullah, Fakhoruddin Ali Ahmed, Iqbal Hossain, MKM Mohiuddin, ORA Rasul Nizam and Tareq Kamal.

Voting for the elections will take place from 10am to 5pm, according to the schedule.

Japan corporate bankruptcies fall in October

AFP, Tokyo

The number of Japanese business failures in October fell 18.7 per cent from a year earlier to 1,387, marking the 10th consecutive month of year-on-year decline, a research firm said Monday.

Liabilities left by bankrupt companies also dropped 55.8 per cent from a year earlier to 851 billion yen (7.81 billion dollars), falling below the 1 trillion yen mark for the first time in three months, Teikoku Databank said.

Government assistance in the form of refinancing guarantees and special financing as well as reduced credit in the private sector have pushed down the number of bankruptcies, Teikoku Databank said.

"But the severe business conditions, under which corporate profits are on a downtrend, has not improved, and the realisation of bankruptcies among small- and medium-sized companies has been only postponed by government aid," the research firm said.

Singapore key exports grow faster than expected

AFP, Singapore

Singapore's key non-oil domestic exports (NODX) grew a better-than-expected 20.6 per cent in October on the back of continued strong demand for electronics goods, the government said Monday.

"On a year-on-year basis, NODX continued to post a healthy 20.6 per cent growth, although slightly moderating from the 25.9 per cent growth in September," government trade body International Enterprise Singapore (IES) said.

The October NODX figures, worth 10.69 billion Singapore dollars (6.18 billion US), were above economists' expectations of 15-19 per cent growth.

Total trade grew 13.2 per cent on the year to 44.18 billion dollars.

Malaysia's third quarter GDP to rise

REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's economy is likely to have grown 4.7 per cent in the July to September period from a year ago, as a global upturn boosted electronic shipments and aided domestic consumption, a Reuters poll showed Monday.

With chip sales looking up and palm oil prices expected to hold firm till year end, Southeast Asia's third-largest economy is on track to post 4.7 per cent growth in 2003, economists said, topping official estimates of a 4.5 per cent expansion.

Dhaka expects duty-free access to Delhi

UNB, Sangsad Bhaban

Bangladesh hopes India will give duty and quota-free access to its products like apparels, construction materials, cosmetics and pharmaceuticals under the proposed free trade agreement (FTA) to reduce the huge trade imbalance.

Replying to Dr Rustam Ali Farazi of the ruling BNP, Commerce Minister Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury yesterday told parliament that Bangladesh's limited export basket is one reason for Dhaka's huge trade deficit of over one billion US dollars with New Delhi.

Bangladesh makes huge import from India, amounting to some Tk 6,000 to Tk 6,500 crore, in official channel,

while India's imports from Bangladesh come to a paltry figure of Tk 350 to Tk 400 crore annually.

In reply to Prof. Shahidul Islam (BNP), Khosru deplored that Bangladesh items like cement and CI sheets that have demand in India are facing non-tariff and para-tariff barriers, customs harassment and hassles of Indian standard certification.

At last month's Dhaka-Delhi negotiations on FTA, the Commerce Minister informed the House that these non-tariff and para-tariff issues figured prominently at the meeting. Non-tariff restrictions on Bangladesh goods must be removed as a basis for striking the proposed free-trade agreement, he said.

However, the minister said the FTA

negotiations with India remained at the very rudimentary level. "It is not possible to say when the FTA would be signed or which items come under free trading."

Replying to another supplementary from Riasat Ali of Jamaat on price-hike, Khosru said Bangladesh is to import onions from India to meet "almost its entire domestic requirement".

Onion prices on the Indian market doubled in mid-October, raising the price in Bangladesh under a cascading impact.

The commerce minister said stress should be given on increase in the production of agricultural items like onion so that the country does not need to depend on the import of such commodities.

DCCI goes to polls on December 14

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

A total of 30 candidates are vying for the directorship of Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI) in its annual election slated for December 14.

The DCCI members will elect eight new directors -- four from general group, two from associate group, and one each from trade group and town group.

According to the DCCI constitution, its board of directors consists of 24 directors. Every year one-third of them retires and eight new directors replace them through election.

The 24 directors including the newly elected eight would select a president, senior vice-president and vice-president for one-year term on December 15, sources said.

The election board has already published the voters' list and list of candidates. This year the total number of voters is 3,113, chamber sources said.

Nineteen candidates have declared their candidature for directorship in general group while nine others are vying for two posts in associate group. One candidate each from trade group and town group has declared their candidacy.

Sugarcane crushing at Faridpur Sugar Mills begins

UNB, Faridpur

Sugarcane crushing for the fiscal 2003-2004 began in Faridpur Sugar Mills on Friday with a target to produce 10,810 metric tons of sugar by crushing 140,000 mts of sugarcane.

Managing Director of the mills M Akramuzzaman inaugurated the crushing at a simple ceremony.

In previous year, the mill produced 9,445 metric tons of sugar against the target of 9,518 mts, mill sources said.

FBCCI, Cambodian apex trade body sign deal Move to boost trade, investment

UNB, Phnom Penh

The apex trade bodies of Bangladesh and Cambodia signed a joint co-operation agreement aiming to boost bilateral trade and investment.

FBCCI President Abdul Awal Minto and Cambodia Chamber of Commerce (CCC) Acting President Sorn Sokna signed the memorandum of understanding at a function here yesterday.

Earlier the Bangladesh trade delegation, led by Minto, held talks with the CCC leaders and top business people, both local and foreign, in Phnom Penh as well as top officials of the Department of Investment and other organisations of the Cambodian government.

In the agreement, the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce

and Industry and the CCC expressed their determination to enhance trade between the two countries as well as increasing joint venture projects comprising entrepreneurs of Dhaka and Phnom Penh.

With the signing of the accord, the FBCCI delegation concluded their weeklong tour of Southeast Asian countries looking for business prospects. Before Cambodia, they had visited Singapore and Vietnam with the same urge for boosting trade and investment.

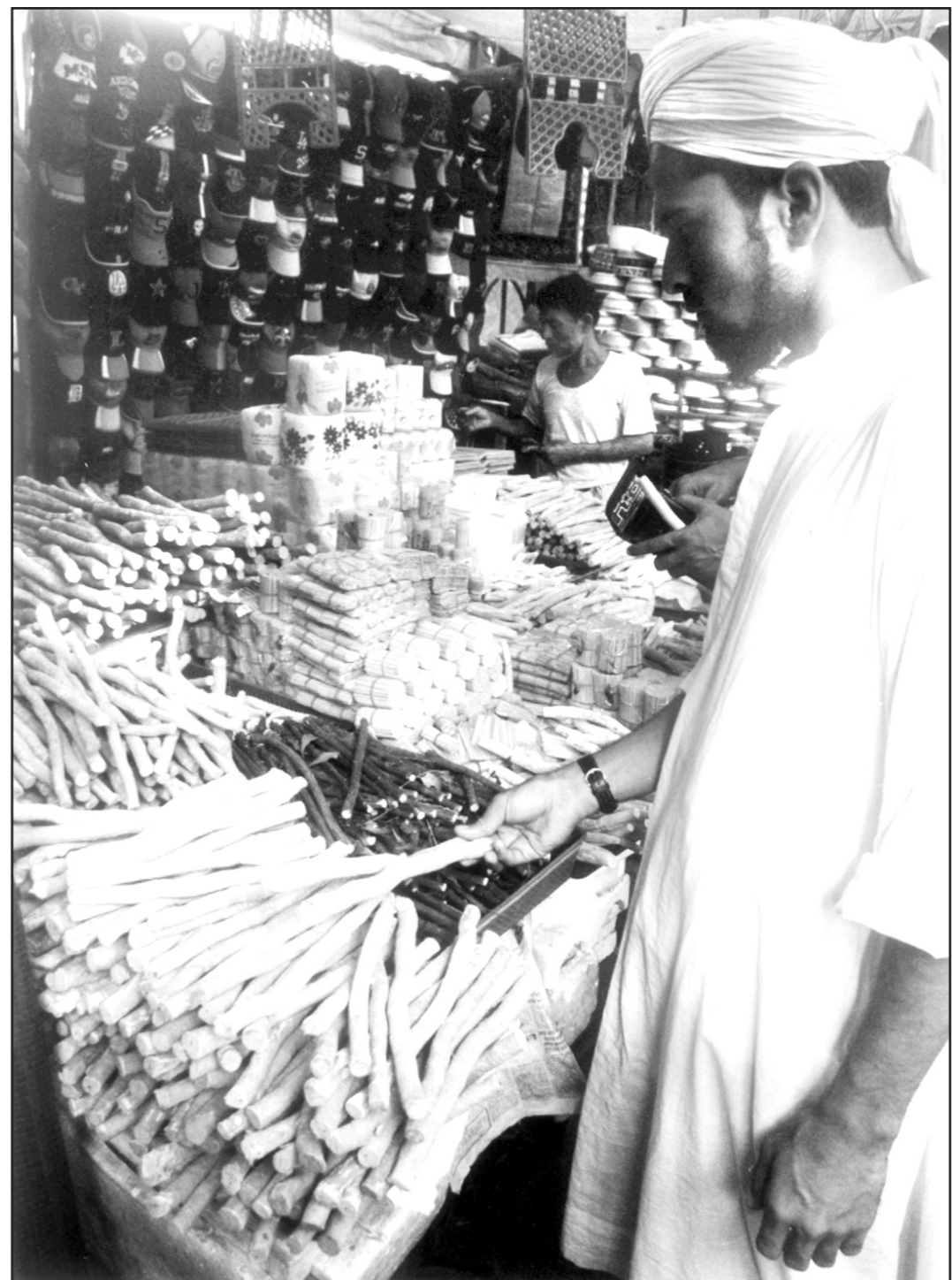
At the meeting, both the FBCCI and CCC leaders emphasised direct air communications between Dhaka and Phnom Penh and simplifying visa procedures, including providing arrival

visas for businessmen from the two countries.

Like in Vietnam, Bangladesh's pharmaceuticals have prospective market in Cambodia. Country's leading pharmaceutical entrepreneur Beximco applied for registration of 10 of its products. Long 10 months have gone by, but they are yet to get permission from Cambodian government.

As the issue was raised in the meeting, the CCC leaders assured of taking proper care. FBCCI President Abdul Awal Minto told them Bangladesh's medicines got market in 68 countries for its quality.

He also offered the Cambodian businessmen Bangladesh's jute, jute products and garment accessories.



A man holds a traditional toothbrush made from tree shoot at a roadside shop in front of Baitul Mukarram Mosque in Dhaka. Sale of the brush picks up during the Ramadan. Vendors charge between Tk 5 and Tk 10 a piece.

Dollar eases against taka

BSS, Dhaka

The US dollar continued to ease against the Bangladesh taka in thin inter-bank trade Monday due to higher remittance inflow on the occasion of eid festival, dealers said.

Against the major currencies, the heightened geopolitical worries hurt the dollar, which hit three-week lows on the euro and two-week lows on the safe-

haven Swiss franc, but Tokyo stocks and the yen took Japan's rising prominence in al Qaeda's eyes particularly poorly, dealers on online global trading said.

The dollar touched its high at Tk 58.4550 per unit on Monday compared to its previous high at Tk 58.4650 on Sunday, dealers of different commercial banks said.

Some commercial banks experienced higher inflow of remittances from

Middle East countries that eased pressure on dollar. Bangladeshi people living abroad are now sending dollar to their relatives on the occasion of holy eid festival, dealers said.

"We have experienced higher volume of inflow of remittance, which is enough to meet our importers' demand and eased pressure on the dollar", a dealer of a private commercial bank said.

Britain losing investment appeal: Survey

AFP, Birmingham, England

Britain is becoming a less attractive place in which to invest, the country's top business grouping said Monday, raising concerns about the threat of an exodus of jobs overseas.

Most all those attending are professional technology purchasers, out shopping for wireless technologies while balancing privacy and pocket-book concerns.

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research and development and manufacturing in recent years, mainly to cut costs.

"When company decision-makers start giving the kind of signals contained in our survey the government must sit up, listen and take action," the CBI's director general, Digby Jones, said at the start of the business lobby group's annual conference in Birmingham, central England.

"There is widespread concern about the UK's declining competitiveness and this is starting to feed through to investment decisions."

However, the MORI poll of more

than 250 business leaders found that 78 per cent of business leaders still think Britain is, overall, an attractive destination for investment.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair was expected to defend his government's record on the economy later Monday in a keynote speech to the business leaders, who were also set to be courted by the new head of the main opposition Conservatives, Michael Howard.

Jones warned that the business vote at Britain's next general election, due by mid-2006 at the latest, was "up for grabs".