

## Grameen digital centre gives locals a stir

MONJUR MAHMUD, back from Madhupur, Tangail

Sending a family photograph through internet to the near and dear ones living abroad is still a dream for the rural Bangladeshis. But it has exceptionally been a reality for the people of Charaljai in Madhupur upazila in Tangail district.

Microcredit pioneer Prof Muhammad Yunus opened an information and communication technology (ICT) centre at Charaljai under the Village Computer and Internet Programme (VCIP), a project of Grameen Communications, in 1999.

"Since then it has been stirring the locals as they are getting a service that they were not used to and in which Bangladesh lags far

behind than many," said Arbinda Gope, a programme officer of Grameen Communications.

Imparting computer training to the local students apart, the centre provides digital studio laboratory service, internet and computer compose facilities.

"It might be difficult for us to survive on computer training alone. But inclusion of the digital photo lab, internet and computer compose facilities in our services has not only benefited the locals but also helped us make profits. People now can get four copies of colour photographs within 10 minutes at Tk 60 only," said Gope, who has been looking after the centre since its inception.

For the beginners, the centre provides training on computer basics and there are some courses

for the advanced learners. Courses on graphics, designing, hardware maintenance and troubleshooting are also available.

Even students from Jamalpur, around 50 kilometres far from the centre, come here to get computer training. Learners apart, government officials, teachers, doctors and journalists also come to the centre to use computer and internet.

So far a total of 356 students received training from the centre and 52 of them are now employed in different fields of ICT. "Our students are also getting jobs in Grameen Communications if there is any vacancy here. We also help them get jobs in other companies," Gope said adding that some local NGOs have employed some of their students.

The centre at Charaljai is one

of the sustainable models in ICT in Bangladesh. While it fetches revenue as high as Tk 40,000 a month, its expenditure ranges between Tk 13,000 and Tk 14,000.

"We used to get the major portion of our revenue from computer training in the early days but digital photo service has now become the prime source of our income," Gope explained.

Recalling one of his experiences in running the centre for the last seven years, Gope said once an old man with all his family members came here.

"Taking a group photograph of his family, I sent it to his son living in the UK. After receiving the photo, son of the old man also sent his picture and all these made the man so happy that I will never forget it," he said.

## Citigroup in 100 best corporate citizens

The Business Ethics Magazine recently listed Citigroup, the owning company of Citibank NA, among the 100 best corporate citizens in its spring 2006 issue.

The Business Ethics Magazine works on evaluating the corporate responsibility of firms, says a press release issued yesterday.

The firms are ranked on performances in eight stakeholder categories—shareholders, community, governance, diversity, employees, environment, human rights and product. Companies thus have a number of strengths and concerns in each category.

Citigroup is the largest banking institution in the world, with about 200 million customer accounts in more than 100 countries.

## Asean, ROK prepare to sign FTA today

AFP, Boracay, Philippines

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) hopes to sign a free trade agreement with South Korea when economic ministers meet here today on in the central Philippine resort island of Boracay.

The proposed agreement could be signed at the close of the three-day meeting of Asean economic ministers but "everything is tentative," trade department officials said.

Delegates from Asean countries Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam are holding a working retreat in Boracay to speed up regional economic integration.

Details of the Asean-South Korea FTA have yet to be finalized and it is not known what products will be covered or when the agreement will take effect.

South Korea and Asean signed an agreement last December to start phasing in a free-trade agreement from July this year.

However, the talks hit a snag in March over tariffs on sensitive items such as food products for Asean and automobiles, steel and mobile phones for South Korea.

Under the proposed deal, South Korea and six more developed Asean countries -- Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand -- were expected to start cutting tariffs from July.

## US-Vietnam talks on WTO entry drag on

AFP, Washington

Former wartime enemies the United States and Vietnam extended into late Thursday talks on the communist country's bid to join the WTO, with the prospects for an imminent deal looking dim.

The talks between teams led by Dorothy Dwoskin, who heads WTO negotiations for the US Trade Representative, and Vietnamese Trade Minister Truong Dinh Tuyen began Tuesday and were due to have wrapped up after three days.

But a US official said they were still continuing late Thursday, and that no announcement would be made on their progress before Friday at the earliest.

It appeared that Vietnam's hopes of clearing the last major hurdle to its entry into the World Trade Organisation before it hosts a flagship summit later this year were unlikely to be met just yet.



Visitors crowd a stall at the three-day information technology (IT) fair styled 'IT Mela 2006' that began on Thursday at Banani Complex community centre at Agrabad in Chittagong. The show comes to a close today.

## Ctg IT fair draws crowd but little business

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

The three-day regional information technology (IT) fair titled 'IT Mela 2006' being held at Banani Complex community centre at Agrabad in the city, pulled a huge crowd yesterday.

A number of deals and bookings for hardware accessories and software were made on the second day of the fair.

However, the turnout of visitors at the fair amid drizzling throughout the day could not satisfy the participants.

With all the three days of the event falling in the vacation on the occasion of Buddha Purnima and the two weekend days, presence of foreign buyers and those from corporate houses was very poor, said the participants.

Bangladesh Association of Software and Information Services (BASIS) is organising the fair for the

first time in Chittagong.

Around 40 IT firms from Dhaka and Chittagong with 60 stalls are showcasing various software, hardware, multimedia, internet and telecoms products and services at the fair.

Tohsin Khan, deputy centre head of The Computers Ltd, Chittagong, said they are showcasing two versions of software on Accounts, Management and Stock Control in CDs at cheapest rate ranging from Tk 3,000 to Tk 6,000.

They sold around 50 software CDs in two days, he mentioned.

Markpro Solution, authorised reseller of Tally, an Indian software for accounting and inventors management system, offered software to single users at Tk 24,600 and to multi-users at Tk 63,000.

Ashis of Markpro said they got bookings for software from two corporate houses.

Markpro Chief Executive Officer Md Sahidul Islam said around 3,500 corporate houses of Dhaka and 150 of Chittagong such as KDS Group, Abul Khair Group, Young One Group and Sanmar Properties use the software.

Link 3 Technology Ltd offered software styled 'Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) Solution' to corporate houses in three packages suitable for sweater industry, knit-dye-garment industry and others, said its branch manager Iqbal Hossain.

Iqbal said young people like students thronged the fair mainly for hardware accessories. But, with the poor presence of corporate buyers, the targeted sale of software might not be achieved, he feared.

The exhibition, which ends today, will remain open for all free of cost from 10am to 8pm.

## Japan sounds alarm on rapid yen rise

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's government showed growing concern Friday at the recent rapid appreciation of the yen, with ministers warning it would undermine economic growth and corporate profits.

"The rapid fluctuation is not desirable. It could affect companies," Finance Minister Sadakazu Tanigaki told reporters, according to Jiji Press.

A stronger yen undermines the competitiveness of Japanese exporters and reduces the value of their repatriated overseas earnings.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Shinzo Abe, the government's top spokesman, also voiced concern.

"Foreign exchange rates should reflect economic fundamentals," Abe was quoted as saying by Jiji.

"We think the excessive volatility is undesirable for the economy and we want to carefully monitor market movements," he said.

The remarks came after the dollar fell below 110 yen briefly in Asian trade Friday for the first time for eight months on renewed speculation that the US Federal Reserve could soon pause in its series of interest rate rises.

## Malaysia to certify halal cosmetics

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia is to certify cosmetics that meet Islamic laws, religious authorities said Friday while denying that imports would be banned from the mainly Muslim country if they do not qualify.

The Director-General of the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM), Mustafa Abdul Rahman, said authorities would issue certificates and logos to cosmetic and toiletry products deemed halal, or allowed under Islam.

"JAKIM is in the process of building up standards in cosmetic and toiletries," Mustafa told AFP. "This is to give guidelines to the companies if they want to have the halal certification."

## Vienna meet may be last chance for WTO talks

### Warns Brazilian president

AFP, Paris

Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula de Silva warned Friday that a summit of European Union and Latin American leaders under way in Vienna is "one of the last chances" to break deadlock in global trade talks.

The 58 countries meeting for the summit "will be faced with one of the last chances to help give an impetus to the multilateral negotiations" in the so-called Doha round of World Trade Organisation trade reform talks, Lula wrote in the French daily newspaper Le Figaro.

"Only brave decisions taken by heads of state and government can guarantee a positive result," he added.

WTO members are struggling to make progress on the Doha round of trade liberalisation talks, raising doubts that they will be able to

clinch a deal as planned by the end of the year.

"We cannot run the risk of seeing the Geneva talks paralysed, lost in the labyrinth of technical difficulties," Lula said, referring to meetings of WTO officials aimed at moving forward the Doha round.

The round, launched in the Qatari capital in 2001, marked a drive to tear down trade hurdles and harness global commerce to boost the economies of poor countries. But it has been dogged by disagreement on fundamental issues.

Agriculture is one of the main stumbling blocks in the stalled talks. Both Washington and Brussels have long traded accusations that the other is not offering big enough cuts in support to farmers.

The Brazilian leader in his article also cited the European Union as

an example for Latin America in its own integration process.

"The European Union has always been an example and a source of inspiration for our plans for regional unity," he said.

As examples of Latin American integration, he cited cooperation groups such as the four-nation trade bloc Mercosur, the five-nation Andean Community and the Central American Common Market.

"From these efforts are born new prospects for investment and reciprocal trade between the two blocs" of Latin America and Europe, he said.

"Plans for energy cooperation, especially in the renewable fuels, symbolise the strategic potential of our partnership."



David A Sack, executive director of International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR,B), and Mir Rashedul Hossain, deputy head of Corporate Sales of mobile phone operator GrameenPhone (GP) Ltd, pose for photographs at an agreement signing ceremony recently. Under the deal, the ICDDR,B will get complete communication facilities under GP's 'Business Solutions' package.

## GLOBAL OIL DEMAND IEA cuts forecast for '06

AFP, Paris

The International Energy Agency (IEA) lowered on Friday its forecast for global oil demand this year and said an increase in Iraqi exports had helped boost worldwide production in April.

Citing mild temperatures in the first quarter and the impact of high prices on consumption, the IEA revised down its estimate of average daily demand this year to 84.8 million barrels, representing an increase of 1.5 percent from 2005, but less than a previous forecast of 85.1 million barrels.

On the supply side, the IEA said that production had increased by 485,000 barrels per day in April from March to a total 85.1 million barrels per day, in part because Iraqi and Nigerian exports had increased during the month.

"A 215,000-barrels-per-day

increase from Iraq was augmented by lesser increases from Nigeria, Venezuela, Libya and Qatar," the report said.

The comments about increasing supply and slower-than-expected growth in demand were set against a backdrop of surging oil prices.

Traders are focused on the possible impact of a conflict between oil-producing Iran and the United States, and also worry about a production shortfall amid increasing global demand.

The report offered evidence to soothe the latter worry, but concern over instability and the lack of spare production capacity in the global system, which could offer a safety cushion in the event of disruption in Iran, is expected to continue to force prices higher.

Oil prices fell in New York and London on Friday, partly on news of the IEA report, traders said.

## Turkish textile millers keen to relocate plants to Bangladesh

BDNEWS, Dhaka

Turkish textile entrepreneurs have expressed interests to relocate their industrial units to Bangladesh to take the benefit of low production cost here, industry sources said.

A 20-member delegation of Dyeing-Printing-Finishing Association of Turkey is expected to visit Bangladesh by the end of this month to look into the investment opportunities.

"They have expressed interests to relocate their firms to Bangladesh as production cost in Turkey is much higher than that in Bangladesh," Chairman of Bangladesh Textile Mills Association (BTMA) MAAwal, who recently visited Turkey, told the news agency.

He said Turkish textile manufacturers are now searching for cost-effective investment destinations.

Turkish investors have large

manufacturing units and relocation of these industries would greatly benefit Bangladesh, he added.

BTMA president said a Bangladesh-Turkey Investors Forum will also be formed in July to make the initiative a success.

A delegation of the Textile Employers' Association of Turkey is expected to visit Bangladesh by September, he said.