BCS International Computer Show '98 gets going

A fine chance to withness software wizardry

By Monjur Mahmud

For the corporate IT managers, it is the perfect chance to have a peep into the wonders of software wizardry -- find out which programmes would enhance the IT capability of their organisations, which configurations would better serve his company's business and, of course, at what prices these would come to his office.

Amin Amir Ali, an IT manager from a multinational company, was at the show to see for himself how he could overcome the shortcomings of the 'Scala' programme, which has proved to be too inadequate to serve his big organisation.

For the next four days he will visit all the 37 software stalls set up by local programming companies participating in this gala exposition of Information Technology (IT), the biggest-ever in the country.

Some of these companies are tailoring their software in accordance with their clients' specifications.

The local programmers have developed some quite sophisticated and highly-useful programmes for different companies.

Technohaven, a leading local company, is now programming its sophisticated Technohaven Integrated Banking System (TIBS). It has developed a number of other remarkable software packages for different organisations.

Among other programmes developed by it are the one for the Bangladesh Railway's computerised seat reservation and the personnel management system for Bangladesh Oxygen.

TIBS will be a multi-user and multi-purpose banking software package, which will cover 100 per cent of bank functions.

An experienced software development team is working hard to complete the programme which is expected to help banks Bangladesh take a big leap ahead.

The country does not have a single banking software package that covers all types of banking activities and is capable of producing a complete up-to-date status report. The existing banking software packages cover only about 40 per cent of the total activities in the banking sector, said officials of Technohaven.

The existing banking software have limited use in branches and are not that capable of networking the branches with their Head Offices.

The new programme will ensure prompt and efficient client services, accurate data entry, and perfect account processing enabling banks drastically reduce wastage of time and helping them shed extra manpower.

Centre for Advanced Computer Technology and Services (CACTS) is another local software programming company which has engaged a professional software development team. The company is able to develop and customise any software required for a small corporate body.

Nexus Computers has developed Garments Information System (GIS), which helps garment units to keep computerised records of its shipment positions, productions, orders, and L/Cs. Already, a number of factories have installed this software.

Nexus has also developed a software for total accounting for the real estate business. The programme will give real estate developers accurate information regarding their profit and loss.

Probity Systems Ltd (PSL) has designed an enterprise resource planning (ERP) solution for commodity distributors.

PSL has also worked for different US companies to make their software Y2K compliant.

The company developed loan management information systems for commercial banks to facilitate loan evaluation and disbursement.

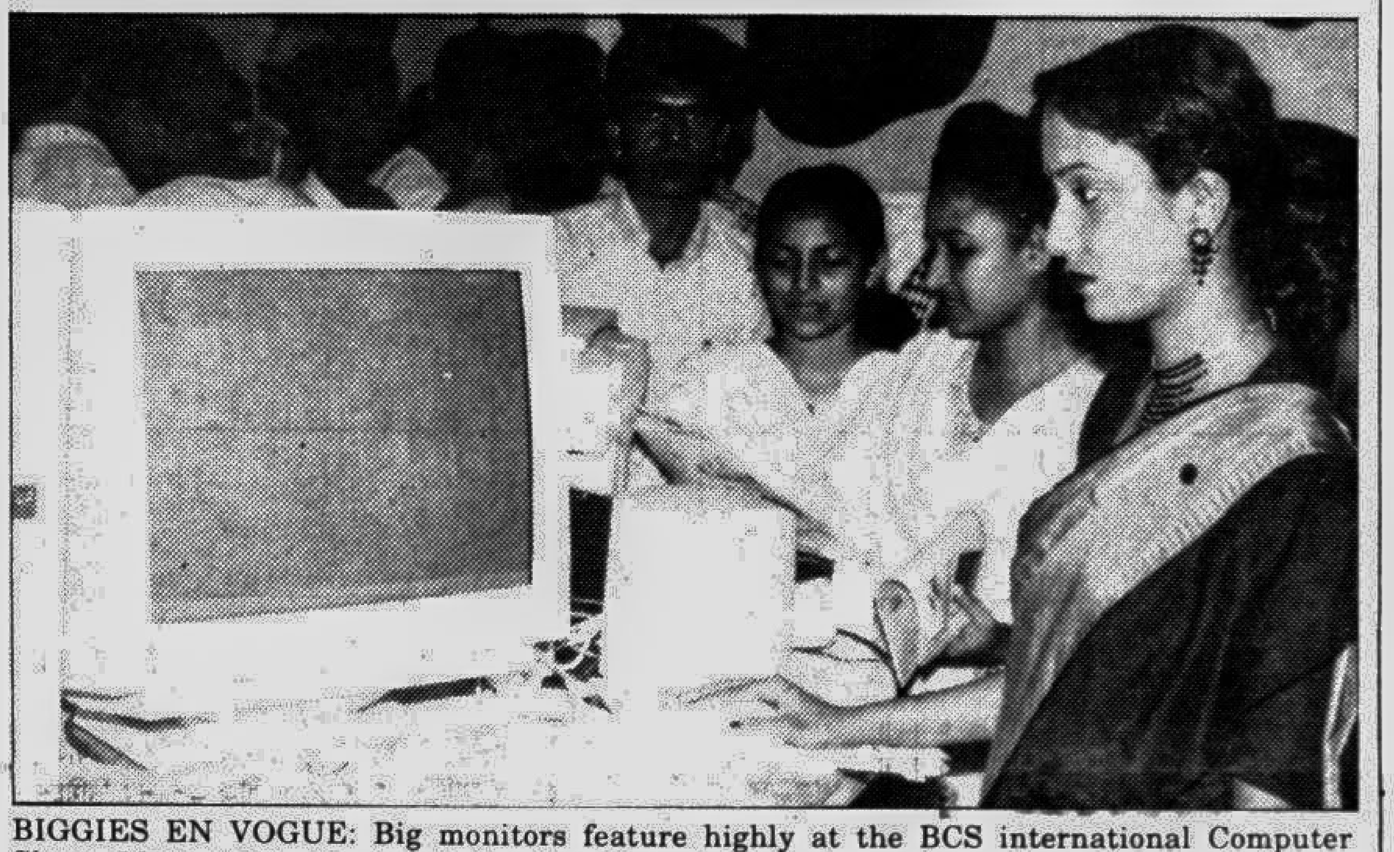
Spectrum Engineering Consortium Ltd (SECL) has designed programmes for the textile industries. Its TxTile 2000 is a software solution with a set of applications grouped and integrated according to business scopes of textile-related dyeing, knitting and readymade garment industries.

Spectrum's other major works include development of a telephone and telex billing system for Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board (BTTB), consumer billing system for zone-4 of the Dhaka Wasa and water management information system for the Surface Water Modelling Centre.

Flora Systems Ltd is offering international standard business solutions to companies and consultancy for cost-effective automation plan.

CDS IT Limited has designed software for payroll management, inventory control, financial management and credit and human rescues management for different NGOs, industries, and corporate bodies.

A huge crowd thronged stalls at the computer show to have a look at new products and to avail of the special fair discounts. —Star photo



BIGGIES EN VOGUE: Big monitors feature highly at the BCS international Computer Show. Most stalls displayed the big 15 and 17 inch monitors that give much better resolutions than the common 14 inch ones. —Star photo

Fallout of recession

MANILA: East Asia's recession is reshaping the political landscape, stoking not only old tensions among states, but igniting domestic discontent of the sort now unfolding in Malaysia, says IPS.

Thus the region, whose stability was anchored on what seemed like an invincible economic boom, now has pockets of ethnic, political and social strife both within and among nations.

Since the crisis struck more than a year ago, governments from Japan down to Indonesia have been shoved aside — either through the ballot or through popular protests — by citizens angry over the region's most painful economic crunch in decades.

In recent months the crisis has also revived later and ugly hostilities, many of them along racial lines between Malays and Chinese, and tested the patience of once-friendly countries.

Indonesia's President Bacharuddin Habibie had derided Singapore for failing, in his view, to come to his country's aid swiftly in months past.

Ties between mainly Chinese Singapore and Malaysia, whose majority is Malay, are at their lowest in decades. They were worsened by Kuala Lumpur's charges that Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew timed the release of his memoirs — critical of Malaysia's past leaders — to take advantage of Malaysia's hardship.

Soon after Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad said Singapore's attempt to undermine his country were "too numerous to be mentioned," Malaysia declared its airspace off-limits to Singaporean military and rescue-search planes.

To critics, Mahathir has been stepping up the us-against-them rhetoric as the recession worsened, just as he had berated Western speculators for trying to "impoverish" Asia. But apart from how the currency controls he imposed work out, Mahathir's biggest problem is the growing opposition to his rule following the Sep 20 arrest of Anwar Ibrahim, the former deputy he sacked for being "morally unfit" for office but who critics say was ousted because he was a rival.

Anwar has pleaded not guilty to nine criminal charges lodged against him, five of which were for "unnatural" sex acts and four on corruption. The High Court has set November 2-14 the trial dates for the four corruption charges.

Syed Husin Ali, president of the Malaysian People's Party, says despite the lack of political machinery. "Public sympathy for him (Anwar) is widespread and seems to be increasing, especially among the youth, lower classes, professionals and government servants."

Political experts say that even among people who are not die-hard backers of Anwar, support for Mahathir seems to be eroding at a time he needs it most.

The risks for Mahathir, largely responsible for Malaysia's growth in recent decades, loom greatest at a time when he has taken what may be the biggest gamble of his 17-year rule: shutting Malaysia off from world financial markets.

While it is way too early to say where the opposition to the 72-year-old Mahathir is headed and whether his legitimacy will be eroded, questions are being asked about whether the end might be in sight for South-east Asia's longest-serving leader.

Political and social turmoil in the aftermath of Asia's crisis has already claimed many casualties among the region's leaders. In many of these upheavals, a key factor has been public anger over perceived or proven corruption and nepotism by leaders favouring kin or cronies through rescue packages ostensibly drawn up to revive the economy.

Public anger over the collapse of Thailand's economic miracle led to the fall of the government of Chavalit Yongchaiyudh in November 1997 and his replacement by Chuan Leekpai.

New age for multimedia use in Bangladesh

By Ziaur Rahman

Multimedia has evolved as the driving technology of the 1990s. Its fundamental strength lies in combining the interactive power of computers, the communications capability of television and the publishing power of the printing press. This synergy has created nothing less than a communication revolution. The scope that lies ahead for multimedia is enormous.

Organisations can market anything using effective multimedia campaigns through different mediums, such as video, broadcasting, CD-ROMs, kiosk networks, web-centric delivery etc. It is also being used to deliver education within and beyond the walls of schools, colleges and universities and enhance the productivity of students. Multimedia is also being used more efficiently and cost-effectively to communicate with customers or company staff at remote locations.

The system can be used for instructional technology. Children education can't have a better delivery system than the style that multimedia offers. The use of instructional technology, it is estimated, can helps learners retain 70 per cent of what they are taught. Yet, a small percentage of new technology and knowledge is delivered through instructional technology medium in Bangladesh. It is unfair that our children, as well as adults, are not given the unique opportunity to avail of the animation/multimedia services. Multimedia's strength lies in its being self-paced, ready on-demand, portable, interruptible, and convenient.

Multimedia delivery can also be achieved through animation. Worldwide animation has proved to be an excellent communication tool. Although Bangladesh has seen some development in this area, there has been little effort towards the growth in this field. The training institutes in Bangladesh have mainly focused on training and development of office productivity tools, such as MS office. Similarly, office record management is being handled through databases and other related applications. Unfortunately, the need for Interactive Multimedia and Animation has not been addressed and, a void still continues to exist. Our neighbouring country, India, has been very quick in understanding this market dynamics and has developed a flourishing animation/multimedia industry over the years. Similarly significant untapped potentials also exist for organisations here to properly utilise this animation/multimedia tool for effectively positioning their products, services or images.

In multimedia development, non-linear editing plays a substantial role, which is one of the fastest-growing areas in personal computing. The privatisation of television programmes and emergence of cable channels, have emphasised the role of non-linear editing which is basically *'motion-picture-style editing for digital video on personal computers'*. It helps in faster and easier video editing. With non-linear editing, one can cut and paste both video clips and sound clips almost as quickly as one can point to them on the computer screen.

Non-Linear video editing can be useful for home videos, at work for professional authoring or in the classroom environment. Anyone with a camcorder will find non-linear editing to be indispensable and full screen, full-time editing becomes common on multimedia PCs.

It is expected that by the end of the decade all consumer and professional video equipment will have a built-in computer that will accept non-linear editing software. Therefore, all digital TVs, digital camcorders, digital disc players, multimedia PCs and most game machines will offer some form of non-linear editing software that will allow people to record, play and edit digital video.

Careers in Interactive Multimedia:

The astounding growth in computer technology has ushered in the generation next for 'Interactive Multimedia', Interactive Multimedia (IM), that can contribute to software, motion picture, design, television, music, game, animation and more, is being vigorously embraced at all levels of industries.

This decade and the last had seen the most profound advancement in computer technology. Its application base has reached all corners of the globe. Our lives have been intertwined with computers. This digital medium has catapulted us to extraordinary levels of efficiency and accuracy. With a foundation in Interactive Multimedia, one can build a career in some of the following areas:

- Software authoring
- Technical and executive support in advertisement agencies
- Interactive design consulting in various Visual Arts, Performing Arts and Science Departments of universities and institutes
- Marketing or public relations departments of various organisations
- Technical and directorial staff at film institutes
- Technical and executive positions in various organisations
- Technical and executive support for web development
- Technical and executive support for commercial documentaries and motion pictures.

Imperatives of privatisation for economic development

By Mahbubur Rahman

It is generally recognised by now that, for several reasons, financial liberalisation is a dominant force to strengthen economic sustainability and ensure its development.

In a period of economic convergence there is a growing need to develop the potentials in a befitting manner so as to accelerate a momentum to economic growth and thereby, raising the standard of living, particularly in the developing world.

Thus, it has become imperative to instrument reforms in industrial, trading and financial policies in order to draw up a strategy, a key aspect of which is privatisation.

In a world which has witnessed rapid economic changes over the last two decades, privatisation has become a centre point of thought and action by policy-makers everywhere. The nationalisation moves taken by several newly independent countries in the decolonisation era during the forties to sixties faltered in such a reckless manner that it readily generated the wave of privatisation around the world.

The excitement and fruitfulness of this new-found economic trend accelerated so fast that in no time it became an essential objeetive for restructuring political, social and even ideological concepts and practices in many parts of the world.

It is in fact, for many years now that discussions at various levels have been taking place about privatisation more than actually showing any tangible progress in its implementation.

As a result, Bangladesh is continuing to incur a staggering loss of around US $ 560 million (Tk 2700 crore) annually for subsidising the loss making SOEs. Whereas in 1992 alone other developing countries completed privatisations in thousands raising over US $23 billion and since then that figure has reached tens of billions.

From Chile to Russia, from Indonesia to the UK, privatisation has proved to be extremely beneficial. In an assessment of the true value of privatisation in several countries, a London based economic policy organisation, the Adam Smith Institute, confirmed that privatised enterprises improved performances in terms of profitability, efficiency and investment.

A major World Bank study on performance of privatised companies in nine developing countries came out with even more spectacular results. It observed that besides creating opportunities for profitability, privatisation has removed constraints on new investments and access to capital.

Despite such good lessons of privatisation, it is absolutely incomprehensible why we are still shouldering the unbearable weight of so many white elephant SOEs in the country. It is a common knowledge that most of the SOEs in our country have been well known for its capacity to lose and inefficiency almost since its inception.

If we try to make a statistical review of how much losses we have already incurred over the years, the figure will not only be shocking and depressing but absolutely catastrophic and tragic as well. The tragedy is even greater when we see that the stalemate is continuing. And as it does so, the nation continues to bleed.

"The tax-payers are in fact deprived of a better life which they could easily afford if the annual fortune of Tk 2,700 crore were not squandered away for decades. On the contrary, should the privatisation be materialised in time, its sale proceeds could be invested in the economy and privatised enterprises in turn could contribute towards the growth, productivity and efficiency with no hangover on the exchequer.

It is unfortunate that very often than not we found our leaders in successive governments tend to play to the gallery and make pledges rather than commitments; specially on the issue of privatisation. Immediate political convenience overtake many excellent programmes and projects; at the expense of the social and economic benefit to the nation. Bureaucratic tangles in the process of our well-being have always been bracketed as a major impediment but never redressed.

A Privatisation Board has been constituted to privatise SOEs. Though it has been a good signal but with no power and authority to do their job enshrined in their constitution, the Board authority finds itself lost in an island. It was encouraging to see that a respectable private sector representative has been appointed Chairman of the Privatisation Board and several Members of the Parliament, across the party line were made Members of the Board. But unfortunately, they are lacking in their authority as before and thereby the situation remains unchanged. One would just wonder if it were only an apparently well intended appointment purposely made to be ineffective under the clutch of "Rules of the Game."

Another important case in point is the fact of incongruent conditionalities. It is learnt that the privatisation process has suffered yet another set back recently when a new condition was imposed on the Board to separate surplus land from the enterprise under sale. It seems, this has been done deliberately to make it further unattractive for a would be buyer, who might have considered to buy a 'JUNK' for the sake of the land to be utilised for entirely a new industry. It is a common knowledge, most of the SOEs under sale can not be made efficient unless these are balanced, modernised, rehabilitated and or expanded. Surprisingly, I was told, such a condition does not apply if it is transferred to a worker's cooperative union. Irrespective of the case, such a condition must be withdrawn forthwith.

There is another discouraging aspect of our privatisation process. According to the terms of sale, a buyer is required to undertake entire accumulated liability/bank loan, etc. of the enterprise; which scares away prospective buyers. I do not know, why any one would like to stake his hard-earned money to shoulder others debt, unless one has a different motive. Our experience of privatisation along with liability in the past has proven to be absolutely wrong and useless to the government as well. All enterprises should be sold "as it is where it is" basis with no encrumbances financial or otherwise.

Anyhow, government must take some serious steps in the right direction without any further loss of time. The entire business community has given successive governments their full support on the issue but it is distressing to see that there has not been any major breakthrough. An otherwise energetic Chairman of the Privatisation Board recently expressed his serious disappointment at the state of the affairs on the road to privatisation. He pin-pointed three major hindrances that are holding him back. Political will, trade unionism and bureaucracy".

However, these could be narrowed down to only one. Given political wisdom and serious commitment, the other two hindrances can be removed and I mean it. For example: without going into the debate of merits and demerits of the Resolution of Ganges Water Treaty and CHT Peace Treaty; the entire nation have been how the present government addressed these two major politically sensitive issues in such a short time: it means 'political commitment.'

The desire and need for privatisation cannot be an emotional matter. It has to be felt in its implementation. In the context of global economic scenario and more particularly, in the context of enabling our future generations to live without the increasing burden on their shoulder, it is imperative that we step into the road to privatisation. Only then, economic liberalisation shall be meaningful. We should not waste any single moment further but jump-start the process of privatisation immediately. Even if the government divest the loss-making enterprises at no price, still it is profitable for the public as it will not cost our exchequer any further drain.

Besides, the government should not restrict its thought on privatising the sick industries alone. It should also seriously concentrate on privatising various utility services including National Airlines, Telecom, Electricity supply, WASA, Ports, Railways etc.

In Latin America and several other countries privatisation has extended to major utility sector such as these. However, in the event government feels strongly about state ownership on political consideration of these vital service sectors, for the time being, these organisations can easily be left to private management forthwith under a 'management contract"; for increasing efficiency and profitability. Privately managed but government owned Sonargaon and Sheraton Hotels are good examples.

It has been proven that privatisation regenerate employment and bring in efficiency and dynamism against popular outcry of loss of employment.

In conclusion, it could be summed up straightway that only wisdom and courage of our political leadership to face the realities can set the ball rolling to embark upon a mission to lead the nation to a road to prosperity, which they rightfully deserve; else the future generation shall be rewarded with no stimulus for their honourable survival but only an Archeological Museum of wasted resources for which they will discredit us for ever.

The writer is the President of International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) — Bangladesh.

Richest LatAm mogul on the line

John Ross writes from Mexico City

Mexico's dive into the North American Free Trade Agreement has been, to put it charitably, a mixed blessing. But, reports Gemini News Service, NAFTA has allowed one Mexican at least to shred the border and take on the Yanquis at their own game — even though his fellow Mexicans may be paying the price.

"Hola Amigo!" yelled the grotesque gringo in the advert identified as Burton Helms, a twist on the unpopular US anti-Cuba trade bill so emblematic of Yanqui arrogance in Latin American.

"Mr Helms" was purportedly selling a US-based long-distance telephone carrier to the Mexican people — the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) opened the gates last year to the Mexican market for US telecommunications giants.

In fact, he was a baldly nationalistic ploy by Telmex, the mammoth Mexican phone monopoly owned by the richest man in Latin America, Carlos Slim Helu, to minimise AT&T and MCI inroads into the protected market he has enjoyed since he bought the utility back in 1990.

Now Senor Slim, as corpulent a man as "Mr Helms", is shouting "Hola Amigo!" across the border as Telmex joins forces with Sprint to invade the US.

Slim's battle to break into North America has been positively gladiatorial. AT&T and MCI are furious at Telmex for charging ten times the accepted international interconnection rate in Mexico (usual cost is a half to two cents a minute — Telmex charged 14) and after a year of unsuccessfully lobbying the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to turn back Slim's march north, threaten to turn to the World Trade Organisation, the arbiter of international trade.

The Mexican tycoon, in turn, accused the Yanqui goliaths of 'freeloading' on his telecoms infrastructure.

Like many of his — admittedly much poorer — fellow Mexicans, Slim is going over to "El Otro Lado" (The Other Side) because that's where the money is. With 28 million Hispanic residents in the USA, more calls are made between the US and Mexico than across any other border on the planet.

Telmex was a billion-dollar-a-year business even before Institutional Revolutionary Party ex-president Carlos Salinas sold it to his friend Slim, a member of Salinas's campaign financing committee in 1988 and a $25 million donor to the long-ruling (69 years) party's 1994 presidency campaign, in the largest privatisation deal to date in Latin America.

Telmex catapulted Slim almost overnight into becoming, at $7.2 billion in 1998, the richest man in Latin America on Forbes Magazine's yearly listings of the world's billionaires.

With Telmex stock one of the few solid blue chips left on both Wall Street and in Mexico City, Slim has steadily consolidated his commercial empire, his enterprises accounting for 20 per cent of the total assets represented in the Mexican Bolsa de Valores (stock market).

The sale has been repeatedly challenged by the left-centre Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) whose founder, Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, charges — no little avail — that privatisation was unconstitutional and even unpatriotic.

The Telmex transfer was a down payment on the North American Free Trade Agreement. The sale, to Slim and two transnational corporations (Southwestern Bell and France Telecom), was hailed by US president George Bush as a sign of Salinas's free-market credentials, and opened the door to the NAFTA negotiations.

Granted a six year monopoly with generously deferred payments, Telmex has continued to turn an annual profit of $1.2 billion and during the first half of 1998 was the biggest breadwinner on the continent, despite the global economic crisis, according to respected Chilean financial daily Estrategia.

Prior to the takeover Telmex was in ruins, its underground lines gnawed by rats and its infrastructure rattled by the earthquake that tore into Mexico City in September 1985. In 1990 only one in ten Mexicans had a line at home and those fortunate few had often waited two years to get a number.

Rather than retrofit coin slots on pay phones, service was decreed free. But few of the phones actually worked.

Under the guiding principle that what's good for Telmex is good for Mexico, Slim and his chief of operations Jaime Chico Pardo have been given carte blanche authority to revamp the corporation, sinking hundreds of millions of their partners' moneys into new technology and downsizing the workforce substantially at the same time. Union workers complain that thousands of jobs have been subcontracted out to minimum wage employers under Slim's tight-fisted fiscal policies.

Now, in 1998, Telmex has a surplus of numbers waiting for new customers and functioning pay phones have been erected on every corner. But they can only be accessed by a computerised calling card that costs more than a days minimum wage.

Improved service has been funded by enormous rate hikes. In its first year under Slim, Telmex home service costs jumped 247 per cent and has doubled since then. A model of Mexican efficiency, Telmex cut service if a bill is not paid in five working days — even if the slow-as-molasses Mexican postal service doesn't deliver the notice until after the due date. Long lines of desperate customers hoping to avoid a costly cut off coil outside local Telmex offices and the utility is the leading source of complaints registered with the nation's consumer prosecutor.

Telmex justifies its repeated rate hikes in local service because it is losing a big chunk of the much more profitable long distance market. Since its monopoly ran out in January 1997, Telmex has ceded 30 per cent of its sales to Alestra (AT&T) and Avantel (MCI).

On the cellular side of the business, Telmex's Telcell has been losing ground steadily to an Atlantic Bell-backed competitor, Iusacel (owned by the billionaire Peralta family, also Salinas cronies) and now only controls 53 per cent of the market. Armed with foreign capital, the nation's two top television magnates, Ricardo Salinas Pliego (TV Azteca) and Emilio Azcarraga Jean (Televisa) have also committed substantial sums to cellular phone start-ups.

Competition is not Telmex's only migraine. Union troubles are giving management a headache too.

The author is a journalist and poet who has been covering Mexico for 30 years. He won the 1995 American Book Award for his book, Rebellion From The Roots — Indian Uprising in Chiapas.

On the line

Telefonos de Mexico was privatised in 1990, with promises of increased investment and better phone services. While some facets of the system have improved, indicators suggest that Telmex's owners may have profited more than the customer