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G8 for launching world trade talks by yr-end

NAGO, Okinawa, July 22: The leaders of the Group of Eight leading nations agreed Saturday to aim at launching a new round of trade talks by the end of this year, a Japanese government official said, reports AP.

The official, who briefed reporters on condition of anonymity, said Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori suggested in a meeting Saturday morning that it is desirable to seek a new round of World Trade Organisation talks by the end of this year.

The official said the other G-8 leaders agreed to Mori's proposal.

Attempts to set the agenda for a new round of global trade talks in Seattle late last year collapsed amid acrimony between developing and industrialised nations over which sectors should be included in the negotiations.

Rokia A Rahman chief of Women Entrepreneurs' Association

Rokia A Rahman has been elected President of Women Entrepreneurs' Association, Bangladesh, says a press release.

The election was held at the Association's sixth annual general meeting yesterday.

Rokia A Rahman is involved in various business, including cold storage, real estate and insurance.

She is a Director of Bangladesh Bank, MIDAS, Chittagong Stock Exchange, and President of Women in Small Enterprises (WISE).

At the meeting, Sabrina Islam and Rokeya Quader have been made First Vice President and Second Vice President of the organisation respectively.

Sabrina Islam is engaged in garment and specialised craft business.

Rokeya Quader is the Chairman of Desh Group of Industries.

The other newly-elected members of the executive committee are Massarat Khan Mushni, Ashrafi Khondkar, Rokeya Rahman Bachop, Rounak Jahan Geeti, Simen Hussain, Hafiza Montaz Hashi, Ferdous Karim, Husna Hena Rahmani Rinu, Aklima Sultana Soni and Mehjabin Khan.

India raises CRR, bank rate

BOMBAY, July 22: The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) yesterday hiked the cash reserve ratio (CRR) by 50 basis points in two stages and the bank rate by one percentage point to stabilise the Indian rupee, says Reuters.

The central bank said it was hiking interest rates after reviewing recent developments in the international and domestic financial markets, including the foreign exchange market.

The rupee closed at a new record low of 45.025/03 per dollar off inter-day lows of 45.075 after opening at 44.91/93. The rupee ended at 44.89/90 on Thursday.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) said the hike in the bank rate to eight per cent was effective from close of business on July 21.

The central bank will hike CRR by 25 basis points in two stages effective from July 29 and August 12 respectively to 8.50 per cent.

This will absorb resource of about 19 billion rupees at each stage, the RBI said.

The central bank also reduced the refinancing available to banks under the collateralised lending facility by 50 per cent of their eligible limits in two stages.

The staggered reduction in banks' collateralised refinancing limits will also come into effect in two stages of 25 per cent each effective from July 29 and August 12.

Chile's entry into Mercosur to mature bloc

BUENOS AIRES, July 22: Full Chilean membership in South America's Mercosur customs union should push the world's third-largest trade bloc to embrace freer trade, lower tariffs and clearer rules, economists said yesterday, reports Reuters.

Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay are full members of Mercosur while Chile and Bolivia are associates. Chile agreed last week to a timetable of talks to become a full member in what is seen as a boost of confidence in the fledgling trade bloc.

This adds weight to Mercosur's image of macroeconomic stability. It also means we could see progress in forming closer business ties," said Enrique Mantilla, president of the Argentine Exporters' chamber.

G8 decides to bridge IT gap with developing countries

Accord to establish 'Dot Force'

OKINAWA, Japan, July 22: May the force be with them.

Leaders of the Group of Eight Nations decided on Saturday to establish a task force, dubbed a "Dot Force," to search for ways to bridge the yawning information technology (IT) gap between industrial and developing countries, reports Reuters.

The G8 gave the aptly named group the task of supporting the development of communications infrastructure in poor countries and drawing them into the Internet-led economic revolution.

"Everyone, everywhere, should be enabled to participate in and no one should be excluded from the benefits of the global information society," the G8 said in an IT charter.

The Digital Opportunity Task (DOT) Force has as yet no members or a specific agenda, but the G8 said it would convene as soon as possible to promote policies that increase access to the tools of information "in a manner responsive to the needs of developing countries."

A Japanese government official said the task force would report back in a year's time — a generation in the Internet age — at the 2001 summit in Genoa, Italy.

The DOT Force faces a daunting challenge to close the digital divide.

Some 90 per cent of Internet hosts computers are in high-income countries with just 16 per cent of the world's population. New York has more Internet

hosts than all of Africa.

Intra-divide

While acting to help poorer countries join the IT age, the G8 still has to solve a digital divide in its own ranks.

The US penetration rate of Internet hosts — a proxy for how many people are connected to the Web — is seven times greater than the European Union's and eight times that of Japan, according to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

In March 2000, the United States added three times more secure servers — crucial for e-commerce — than the rest of the 29-member OECD put together, or 10 times more per capita.

Japan went into the summit

after taking steps to boost Internet usage by reaching an accord with Washington to open up its own telecommunications market to greater competition.

Japan resisted until Wednesday's demands to cut "last mile" rates charged by its giant telecoms carrier for rivals to use its lines connecting homes and businesses.

Washington has argued that the higher rates that companies and consumers pay for access to the world's second largest telecoms market helps explain why Japan trails the United States in the growth of the Internet.

Japan's government says one in five Japanese — more than 27 million people — has an Internet connection.

Annan disappointed at G7 failure on debt relief

UNITED NATIONS, July 22: UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan expressed disappointment yesterday at the failure of the Group of Seven industrial nations to reach agreement on how and when to ease crippling foreign debts for the world's poorest countries, reports Reuters.

"For four years we have had too many promises and too little action," he said. "I urge all parties to commit themselves to resolving their differences on this vital issue as a matter of urgency."

At this week's summit in Okinawa, the seven leading industrial nations said they would

make fresh efforts to fulfil a year-old promise to provide up to \$100 billion in debt relief for 41 poor countries, most of them in Africa. But they offered no new initiative.

"I recognise that there are no simple solutions to the debt problem," Annan said in a statement.

"But where there is agreement in principle that debt relief is essential and when delays have a profoundly negative impact of the lives of poor people, clearly more must be done."

The G7 agreed in Germany last year to write off as much as \$100 billion in debt owed by the 41 countries, known as the

Highly Indebted Poor Countries. But Annan noted only nine out of the 41 had qualified for debt relief, and even those had only 35 per cent of their debt, on average, cancelled.

On July 11, he wrote to the leaders of Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States with proposals on how to broaden the programme and make sure the freed monies would not be used for weapons.

His letter arrived shortly after finance ministers of the seven countries, preparing for the summit, came to no agreement on how to revive the stalled proposal.



Rokia A Rahman, the newly-elected President of the Women Entrepreneurs' Association, is seen with members of the Executive Committee. The election was held in the 6th Annual General Meeting of the Association yesterday.

— WEA Bangladesh photo

Rian Motors launches new Suzuki bike

Rian Motors Ltd, a subsidiary of Rangs Group of Companies, has launched a new motorcycle 'Suzuki Max 100R' in the Bangladesh market, says a press release.

The launching of the product was made at a function in the company's office at Tejgaon on Friday.

The function was presided by the Chairman of Rangs Group of Companies, Aktar Hussain.

Mahbubul Gani, Managing Director of Rian Motors Ltd, made the inaugural address while Mohammad Ali Din spoke on behalf of the Dealers' Association.

Directors of Rangs Group of Companies, high officials, Kamaluzzaman, Manager Habibur Rahman, Deputy Manager of Rian Motors Ltd and dealers were present at the function.

The chairman of the company told the dealers that Suzuki Max 100R motorcycle is made with the same engine and technical excellence of renowned Suzuki Samurai engine — the no-problem bike.

He opined that Suzuki Max 100R motorcycle is launched in the market to cope with the competitive market. Technically highly-advanced and powerful motorcycle, Suzuki Max 100R is made by TVS Suzuki Ltd, India, in collaboration with Suzuki Motor Corporation, Japan.

He also mentioned that the after-sales service will be ensured by the organisation with utmost priority.

Rian Motors Ltd is the sole local distributor of Suzuki Motor Corporation, Japan, and TVS-Suzuki Ltd, India.

Oil prices fall further

LONDON, July 22: Oil prices declined sharply yesterday amid mounting confidence that OPEC giant Saudi Arabia is quietly pumping more crude to cool overheated energy markets, says Reuters.

North Sea Brent crude futures for September last traded at \$27.47, a loss of 80 cents, after falling 61 cents on Thursday and 43 cents fall on Wednesday.



Picture shows the launching ceremony of Suzuki Max 100R by Rian Motors Ltd at the company's office at Tejgaon in the city on Friday.

— Rian Motors photo

Arena aims to give students e-career clues with PDWE

By Staff Correspondent

Professional Diploma in Web Engineering Programme (PDWE) would enable a large section of the Bangladeshi students to pursue e-commerce and web-oriented careers, speakers at a press conference said yesterday.

The conference was organised by Aptech Worldwide on the occasion of the launching of its Arena Multimedia Professional Diploma in Web Engineering Programme (PDWE).

"If our young generation could keep up with the course, then it would be very helpful for them to find careers in e-business," Atiq-e-Rabbani, President of Bangladesh Association of Software and Information Services (BASIS), told the conference as special guest.

Rabbani termed the course as "very timely" and said we "cannot just simply avoid the growth of e-commerce, because we are breathing in an Internet environment."

Tarun Mitra, Head of Country Operation of Aptech Bangladesh Limited, said: "The

new PDWE programme offers the students a chance to specialise in web technologies, which are in demand the world over and encompasses the most advanced Internet and web engineering technologies."

The web development projects incorporated into the PDWE curriculum prepare the students to face the challenges of the dot.com age, Mitra said.

Describing the importance of web learning, he said about 70 per cent of all new investments are going to the dot.com sector.

He said the diploma course offered by his firm would be very useful for Bangladeshi students to find their destinations in the Net world.

Mitra said just as computers had revolutionised the information technology industry, the Internet has these days revolutionised the way information is managed and shared.

There are about 200 million people connected to the Net and this figure will cross the 500 million mark by 2003, he said.

Mitra said people are using

the Net for shopping, consulting doctors, listening to radio programmes, making investments, tracking packages, having phone conversation, checking out political candidates and getting fresh news.

The comprehensive one-year professional diploma would cost Tk 120 per hour or Tk 47,000 a year.

Aptech Worldwide, which has a global network, has emerged as one of the largest training providers with over 1,500 centres spread across 33 countries.

There are five Aptech centres in the country, three in the capital and two others in Chittagong and Barisal, officials said.

The PDWE certificate would be accepted by all standard organisations as Arena has earned an excellent reputation worldwide as a high-quality educational provider, they said.

Among others, Aptech officials Brig (ret'd) Zakir Hossain, Nazneen Kamal and Dr Kaniz Fatema attended the press conference at Dhaka Club.

US, Japan agree on fourth yr of deregulation talks

OKINAWA, Japan, July 22: Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori and US President Bill Clinton agreed today to push into a fourth year talks to deregulate bilateral trade, after putting to rest a row over telecoms rates, says Reuters.

The latest round of discussions ended this week with the submission of a joint report to the leaders on high-stakes sectors ranging from energy, insurance, and telecommunications.

A row over the costs of competing in the world's second

largest telecoms market was resolved when Japan agreed to lower "last mile" rates, that competitors must pay to use giant carrier Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Corp's (NTT) lines connecting homes and businesses.

Asked after a meeting on the sidelines of the Group of Eight nations' summit in Okinawa whether the talks on deregulation would stretch into a fourth year, Mori said: "Yes, we agreed to continue the discussion... for another year."

The end to the telecoms row,

which finished on Wednesday after more than a week of talks in Tokyo, had become something of a stumbling block to a smooth weekend meeting between the two leaders.

US business leaders in Tokyo argued on Wednesday that deregulation talks between the world's two largest economies would have to continue to foster greater opportunities for growth on both sides of the Pacific.

The agenda over the next year, however, was left open.

BTTB's hunt for a scapegoat

Board puts blame on ISPs for causing Tk. 2500cr annual loss

By Abu Saeed Khan

BTTB is the only telecom provider in South Asia, charging flat rate for local calls and recovering operating losses from the unrealistically inflated long-distance charges. Therefore, circuit occupancy in the local networks of its multi-exchange area (namely Dhaka and Chittagong) gets so high that call completion rate drops as low as 20-30 per cent during peak hours, inefficient network coupled with the flat rate in local calls has been killing 70 per cent of the attempted calls for years in BTTB networks. It earned Tk. 1,190 crore out of the 30 per cent successful calls during 1997-98 fiscal year and Tk. 995 crore in 1996-97. All it needs is a calculator to ascertain BTTB's lost revenue due to the chronic poor call completion rate.

BTTB is blundering with the puritan concept of maximising revenue through vertical growth. Adding new telephone lines and digitizing the analog ones are certainly a priority in lowest telephony-stricken Bangladesh. But, ignoring value added services to increase the revenue horizontally is a criminal offense of BTTB. Tawfiq Mahmood wrote in May 17, 2000 issue of The Daily Star that "BTTB exchanges supplied by Alcatel and Ericsson are very much ready to offer services like call divert, call hold, conference etc. Cultural

bankruptcy on providing services coupled with ignorance in marketing has kept these invaluable resources utilised by BTTB. All they know is how to refrain the others from providing cost-effective and modern telecom solutions. After waging an all-out and prolonged hostility against the mobile operators, BTTB is now making itself a laughingstock against the ISPs on the VoIP issue. BTTB's hue and cry for losing revenue is a proven bluff due to its negligence towards the potentials of SS7."

The government certainly has no desire to probe the reasons behind BTTB not launching the value added services, because that would open up the Pandora's box. While increasing BTTB's revenue through multi-metering local calls and bundling numerous value added services are concerned — billing becomes a critical issue. The government's pride of digitizing the telecom network diminishes due to BTTB's pre-historic manual billing exercise. The bills are manually prepared and printed out through computers. Although billing has been purely a technical phenomenon, the ledger-loving accountants from the cadre service rule that domain in BTTB. Professional incompetence coupled with institutionalised corruption has been the major deterrent to developing the tele-

com sector in Bangladesh. These Jurassic-aged professionals are highly sensitive against launching any new service by BTTB. Because that increases their workload as the bills are prepared manually. Then again, they are unwilling to introduce billing technology, fearing the control being shifted to the engineers and the entire billing system becoming transparent. BTTB engineers also do not rock the boat as nobody wants to mess around with the accountants.

Despite being in the business with technology, BTTB's inhibition towards technology has made itself an anti-development organization. When VoIP has become a tool for day-to-day business, BTTB considers it as the forbidden apple. Such notion is pertaining to its ignorance on own subject. This organization has everything but a workable library. It finds every possible excuse on spending money except buying books, journals and publications. Even the top notch of BTTB are not bothered being updated through Internet, which they have been provided free of cost for unlimited use by own department. Since the paycheck is guaranteed at the end of every month, why bother for all the hassles.

Everyone, however, reserves the right to shape his or her

own professional landscape without encroaching other's territories. VoIP is a reality, which has been globally recognised by the industry as well as by the International Telecommunications Union. BTTB has been losing revenue for its own inefficiencies where VoIP is irrelevant. Singapore is unable to stop VoIP and they are framing laws to legitimise it. India has already promised to legalise VoIP and it is a matter of time to approve legislation by the Parliament. Pakistan has already issued an SRO on VoIP.

It is a matter of pride that some ISPs are doing VoIP in Bangladesh. This jubilation is, however, overshadowed by nepotism. ISPs owned by the relatives of ruling party hierarchy are allegedly exempted from the BTTB witch-hunt. The government or BTTB has no right to restrict any ISP from offering VoIP. Most interestingly, even the ISPs have no control over the customers using VoIP. Many people use VoIP extensively without any help from their ISP. Choosing the way of spending own money is the fundamental right of every citizen. Neither the government nor BTTB can ever dictate that.

That's why all ISPs have been choosing own satellite carrier since last February, which ended the era of state-sponsored extortion by BTTB. It prompted the ISPs immediately

cancelling respective contract with BTTB for leasing the satellite circuits.

According to a Daily Star report on July 15, 2000, BTTB is still sending bills for paying the satellite transponders, which the ISPs have not even been using anymore! The state-owned telecom provider is still intoxicated by the arrogance of its void monopoly. This report further alleges that BTTB is conspiring to swallow the three months security deposit of the ISPs who terminated the contract.

BTTB had conspired against the introduction of fax machines and digital PBX in late 80s but failed. Its infamous plotting against the mobile operators by denying access to fixed telephony is unique in the world. The mobile clientele is exceeding 200,000 by next quarter in opposition to BTTB's 500,000 national total. Now the ISPs are accused of stealing such an amount of money, which BTTB has never earned and not even capable of earning in the near future.

The ISPs should be united against BTTB by taking the latter to the court. The government will not dare defying the verdict. Because, a very recent judgment of the High Court to imprison a serving Secretary for 14 days delivered a simple but significant message — "The law is very much alive in Bangladesh and this country is neither Indonesia nor Nigeria." BTTB must be trapped and tamed before hunting a scapegoat from the ISPs to cover up own revenue scam caused by its corrupt and primitive business practice. The clock is ticking.

The writer is a Research Analyst with EMC World Cellular Database.

Proton to get ready in 2005 for competition under AFTA

KUALA LUMPUR, July 22: Malaysian carmaker Proton will be ready for free market competition in 2005 under the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (AFTA), a report said today, reports AFP.

Rafidah Aziz, minister for international trade and industry, was quoted by the New Straits Times newspaper as saying that Proton was doing whatever was necessary to reduce their costs.

"I am sure that Proton, knowing fully well what AFTA is, is doing what it needs to do to cut costs," she said.

However, company officials earlier hinted that the task of cutting costs to meet AFTA requirements would be difficult. Proton would not find it easy to cut costs and improve the quality of locally manufactured cars in "four short years," the newspaper previously quoted Fumio Yoshimi, Proton's director when the main Japanese director is absent, as saying.

Yoshimi, who is also Mitsubishi Motors Corp's general manager for Southeast Asia, said once Proton's tariff protection is removed, its share of the domestic market would dip to less than 30 per cent.

At the moment, Proton car sales make up more than 65 per cent of the local car market.

Yoshimi added that the cost for Proton to make its own engine, gearbox and transmission was too high, considering Proton's production capacity of 240,000 units a year.