

EU voices hopes of banana row breakthrough

BRUSSELS, Sept 23: European Union officials voiced hopes yesterday that their latest proposal to settle a long-running trade dispute over bananas will satisfy the United States and get US sanctions lifted, says Reuters.

EU experts are working out the details of a "first come, first served" mechanism to divide up the 15-nation bloc's banana import quotas and bring its system into line with World Trade Organisation (WTO) rules.

The EU's executive commission is due to adopt a report on the proposed system on October 4 and present it to EU foreign ministers on October 9.

Since the WTO ruled against the EU's current banana import rules last year, the EU has been struggling to come up with an alternative that satisfies the United States and Latin American producers who challenged the existing rules as well as producers in EU territories and the Caribbean.

The EU is under pressure to solve the dispute because the United States has imposed \$191 million of sanctions on EU goods in retaliation for the banana spat and is threatening to raise the pressure by rotating EU products hit with sanctions.

US officials said last week that President Bill Clinton had delayed decision on rotating the sanctions after efforts by British Prime Minister Tony Blair to resolve the banana and other trans-Atlantic trade disputes. Britain fears the Scottish cashmere industry will be hit by the revised sanctions.

India to hike fuel prices

NEW DELHI, Sept 23: India will implement an across-the-board hike in the price of petroleum products to offset surging global oil prices, Petroleum Minister Ram Naik said today, reports AFP.

Speaking to reporters after a cabinet meeting, Naik said a precise announcement on the extent and timing of the hikes would be made at a later date.

"We have three options in hand, the floating of oil bonds, a reduction of customs and excise duties and a hike in prices. It will be a mixture of all three," Naik said.

The increase in the prices of kerosene, diesel, cooking gas, petrol and aviation fuel will be one "which the people can bear," Naik stressed.

Analysts have predicted a hike of between 10 and 15 per cent.

The increase had become inevitable in the wake of a soaring international crude oil price which has expanded India's already heavy oil import bill.

Petroleum products in India are heavily subsidised by the government and any increase in prices carries a heavy political risk.

Several governments have had their fingers burned by intense public protests that followed attempts to cut subsidy levels.

India imports more than 70 per cent of its petroleum needs and the weakness of the rupee against the dollar, combined with the rising international oil price has hit government coffers hard.

India's oil import bill topped 10.5 billion dollars for the financial year ending March 2000 and is expected to rise by about seven billion dollars for the year ending March 2001.

Bureau Veritas trains customs officers

Bureau Veritas, a government-appointed PSI agent for Block C, conducted three separate training sessions for the customs officers from September 10 to September 21, says a press release.

Two of these sessions were held at Dhaka Custom House and the third was held at the Customs Training Academy in Chittagong.

The first course was on "Harmonised System classification". The course emphasised the use of computerised data base for correct classification under the harmonised system. The 2nd course was on the customs valuation, using the GATT Value Code. It is notable that Bangladesh customs changed its value regime from Brussels definition of value to the GATT valuation on February 15 this year.

The GATT valuation code is being used by almost all the members of WTO. The method is markedly different from Brussels Definition of Value (BDV) - tariff value and emphasises the use of transaction value for customs duty purposes. Pierce Rouane, a customs expert working for the BV group conducted these two sessions.

The course in Chittagong on "Fraud prevention and post clearance audit" was conducted by Garry Murphy, a British customs expert, and Andrew Yell, a former British customs official, currently working for Bureau Veritas Group.

Grameen Software launches own IT education franchise

Star Business Report

With a view to developing human resources for the global information technology, Grameen Software Ltd yesterday formally launched its own countrywide IT education franchise -- Grameen Star Education (GSE).

Grameen Bank Chairman Professor Muhammad Yunus inaugurated the GSE at the Grameen Bhavan in the city.

The education franchise will spread its operation throughout the country to provide IT education in all divisional and district towns.

The training service providers said that the GSE centres will evaluate the current training standard in the country and work for removing the existing deficiencies and gaps through an integral training method.

Giving an overview of GSE, Major Manzurul Haque (Retd), Chief Operating Officer of Grameen Software Limited (GSL), said that Bangladesh is making rapid progress in the IT industry. A number of IT parks including Grameen IT park are expected to be in operation within a short time. Various local and foreign IT companies will be operating from the IT parks and they would require thousands of IT professionals.

Besides, a large number of IT professionals will be wanted from Bangladesh to meet global demand.

He said that GSE will offer courses in three categories through semester system. The

duration of each semester will be four months with three classes per week. Each day, students will take lessons for four hours.

The first course, Grameen Star Education Software Professional (GSESP), will be divided into three semesters, each of 220 hours, designed to make the students competent in analysing, designing, developing, implementing, commissioning and debugging solutions based on Microsoft and Oracle platforms.

The second course, he said, will be Grameen Star Certified Network Engineer (GCNE), divided into two semesters of 220 hours which will develop the students as experts in Microsoft Windows 2000 networking environment.

The third course, Grameen Star Certified e-Technology Professional (GCETP), will include two semesters of 220 hours each for e-commerce application developers. The students will become SUN and JAVA application developers.

The focus areas will be site designing, site hosting, application development, security implementation, monitoring and administration of e-commerce sites.

Syed Ahsan Habib, an IT expert who works with the World Bank, said the new technology has brought opportunities for the third world nations to change their economic situation.

He said that many developing countries were failing to tap this opportunity due to lack of human resources.

Habib said Bangladesh also lacks human resources to tap businesses and many private training providers are coming up to create IT professionals. He also urged the IT centres to ensure standards of education.

Atiq-e-Rabbani, General Secretary of Bangladesh Association for Software Information Service (BASIS), said it will take some more time for the country's IT sector to yield results.

BASIS President SM Kamal also stressed the need for trained human resources to compete in the global environment.

President of Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI) Afabul Islam was also hopeful about the country's IT future.

He said that 30 per cent of IT professionals working in the USA are from South East Asia.

Tarun Kumar Mintra, Country Operation Head of Apteck, said back-office automation business worth trillion dollars offers a big scope for Bangladesh. IT professionals mentioned that India and Philippines were already ruling the field.

The Daily Star Editor Mahuz Anam and Deputy Managing Director of Grameen Bank Khaled Shams also spoke on the occasion.



Professor Muhammad Yunus inaugurates Grameen Star Education at Grameen Bhavan in the city yesterday. Prof Jamilur Reza Chowdhury, former advisor of caretake government, is also seen.

-- Star photo

Indian farmers to campaign against global seed firms

BANGALORE, India, Sept 23: More than 25 Indian peasants groups and foreign delegates will join a "Seed Tribunal" conference here Sunday to launch a fight against the globalisation of the seed industry, organisers said Saturday, says AFP.

The stars of the meet are Jose Bove, France's anti-globalisation hero and Percy Schmeiser, a Canadian farmer who is fighting an alleged patent rights violation case against a local subsidiary of Monsanto, the US-based agro-chemical and seed firm.

The two-day event will culminate in a rally scheduled to be attended by more than 100,000 farmers from this southern Indian state of Karnataka, of which Bangalore is the capital, the organisers said.

The World Bank, the foreign corporations and the World Trade Organisation have wiped out the Indian public sector firms and allowed multinational companies to operate in the Indian seed industry, said Vandana Shiva, an Indian Ecologist who is heading the conference.

"The liberalisation of the seeds industry and the arrival of the gene giant Monsanto, has resulted in frequent crop failures, huge expenses for pesticides and high level of debts for the farmers," Shiva said.

"Genetic engineering of seeds is failing in industrialised nations. In Europe it is not commercial to sell them. So they are targeting Asia and India. Monsanto will collapse if it does not grab Indian market," she said.

"We cannot afford the Monsanto technology for India as most of the farmers will be wiped out. The seed exchanges among farmers has been a topic

of discussion in the government but the government has been hijacked by corporations," Shiva argued.

Monsanto has been in the thick of controversy in India after the government cleared a plan for trials of genetically engineered cotton seeds despite opposition from non-governmental forums.

Globally, the world's top 10 seed companies control one

third of the 23-billion-dollar commercial seed trade and account for 44 per cent of sales.

India has referred two laws - the Patent Bill and the Protection of Plant Varieties and Farmers Rights Bill - to a parliamentary panel under its World Trade Organisation commitments.

Shiva said the bill will promote piracy of India's genetic wealth.

Weekly ReadyCash Prize Winners

The latest draw of the fortunate ReadyCash prize winners took place yesterday at Dhanmudi office, M E Islam, Secretary of American International Bangladesh Ltd (ReadyCash), announced the names of the lucky prize winners.

Prizes For New Card Holders		
Prizes	Winners	Card No
Hertz Rent-a-Car	Md Raju	4994
FedEx-Federal Express	Ruma Khan	4952
Lunch for two at China Junction Restaurant	Md Maruf Ahmed	4933
Lunch for four at Jollyvee	Md Azizul Hoque	5002

ReadyCash encourages its cardholders to read The Daily Star on every Sunday for a new listing of prize winners.



Vic Sheppard (right), Emirates' Sales Manager for UK and Ireland, poses with Sarah Miller, Editor of Conde Nast Traveller, and top British Comedian Griff Rhys Jones at London's Victoria & Albert Museum where Emirates picked up the award for World's Best Long-Haul Business Airline in the magazine's Readers' Travel Awards 2000. -- Emirates photo

India to help set up jt venture cement plant at Chhatak

Delhi okays exchange of letter

NEW DELHI, Sept 23: The Indian government today approved the exchange of letters with Bangladesh indicating support to the establishment of a \$210 million cement plant in Chhatak and committed to facilitate mining of limestone and shale, border crossing by technical personnel and construction and maintenance of a 17-km conveyor belt, says BSS.

The approval to the exchange of letters for the joint venture project by a French company Lafarge Surma Cement Ltd in collaboration with Bangladesh's Mawshum Minerals Private Ltd came at a cabinet meeting presided over by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, official sources said.

The cement plant will have a

capacity of 1.2 million tonnes per annum based on lime stone to be exported from Meghalaya, India, the sources said.

The quarry in India will be connected to the cement plant in Chhatak (Bangladesh) by a 17-km long conveyor belt, the sources said adding "to execute this project it is necessary to issue operational clearance in support of the establishment of this cross border project."

In another major decision, the cabinet approved the proposal for roll back of retirement age of board level and below board level employees of National Textile Corporation Limited and its subsidiary companies from 60 to 58 years with immediate effect.

The decision will lead to an

estimated savings in the wage bill approximately rupees 62 crore per annum on account of superannuation of about 4370 employees.

Meanwhile, briefing newsmen after the meeting parliamentary affairs minister Pramod Mahajan said that prices of petroleum products may be revised in the next 48 hours in view of sharp rise in crude oil prices in the international market.

Mahajan told reporters that the petroleum minister informed the cabinet about the sharp rise in oil pool deficit, which is estimated to rise to over 24 thousand crore rupee at the end of current fiscal, if the prices were not revised.

Orion Registrar Inc. organises training on ISO 9001: 2000

A day-long training programme on ISO 9001:2000 was held at BRAC Centre Inn in the city recently, says a press statement.

Orion Registrar Inc., a Colorado, USA-based ISO 9000 certification body, sponsored the training programme.

Paul M Burck, President of Orion, conducted the training. New requirements of the ISO 9001:2000 version were discussed in the training programme. Some case studies of Orion American clients who have already complied with ISO 9001: 2000 were presented in the training.

It may be mentioned that Orion Registrar Inc. has been rated the best registrar in USA and Canada for two consecutive years - 1999 and 2000 - by the Quality Digest, USA.

Orion is also the largest registrar in Bangladesh. Sixty top and senior management staff of 300 companies attended the training.

Former British colonies want quicker IMF debt relief

PRAGUE, (Czech Republic), Sept 23: Commonwealth ministers slammed a plan Saturday to double the number of countries getting IMF debt relief by the end of the year, saying all the red tape and lack of funding made it unrealistic, reports AP.

The group of 54, mostly poor, former British colonies said under the plan, developing countries had to jump through too many hoops to get debt relief and rich countries were too slow in providing needed cash.

"Their conditionalities need to be simplified and more coherent," said Luisa Dias Diogo, finance minister of Mozambique. "In our country, almost 150 to 180 measures had to be taken in 12 months."

The International Monetary Fund and its sister lending agency, the World Bank, are holding their annual meetings here next week, and they have said they plan to double to 20 the number of poor nations receiving special relief packages that forgive substantial debts.

But qualifying countries

must also meet a number of economic reforms in order to receive the debt relief, and many countries criticise the many conditions for hamstringing local leaders.

Diogo also said rich nations have so far fallen short on raising the US\$ 28 billion needed to bring 10 more countries into the program this year.

In the United States, for example, President Bill Clinton has requested US\$ 435 million as the US portion of the debt relief, but Congressional budget writers are considering far less.

Thousands of Thai women victims of debt bondage in Japan

WASHINGTON, Sept 23: Thousands of Thai women suffer debt bondage and "slavery-like conditions" in Japan where they are trafficked into the country's sex industry, according to a new report released here Thursday by a major US human rights group, says IPS.

In a blistering 227 page study, New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) charges that Japanese officials, while aware of the dimensions of the problem, have failed to take strong action to curb the trafficking, particularly against those forces, such as the Yakuza and other underworld groups, which benefit from the practice.

"If the Japanese government is so concerned about the

problem, it should do something for the victims instead of just talking about it," said Regina Ralph, the director of HRW's Women's Rights Division.

"It is high time to stop the rhetoric and start some serious law enforcement," she said, noting that the principal victims of police crackdowns against foreign sex workers are the women themselves.

The report, "Owed Justice: Thai Women Trafficked into Debt Bondage in Japan," is the latest in a series on the growing problem of global trafficking of women put out by HRW and based on a six-year study carried out by it and other rights groups in Japan and Thailand. Much of the study consists of

excerpts of interviews in which victims recount their experiences.

Its release coincides with action in Congress here to toughen US laws against human trafficking, which, according to a recent report by the Central Intelligence Agency, has become a multi-billion-dollar-a-year industry and the fastest-growing source of profits for organised criminal enterprises around the world.

As many as the million people, primarily women and children, cross national borders each year in search of what they believe is legitimate work, but which turns out to be a form of virtual slavery or indentured servitude to employers who used them as prosti-

tutes or in hard labour. The CIA estimated earlier this year that, of the global total, some 50,000 such people are brought to the United States each year, mostly from Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, Mexico and Asia.

Like the United States, Japan exercises a major pull for desperately poor people, particularly from poor region elsewhere in Asia. The Report City estimates that some 150,000 non-Japanese women - many of them Thai or Filipino - employed in the sex industry.

The sexual exploitation of foreign women has been a sensitive issue in Japan for some time. During World War Two, the imperial army enslaved an estimated 200,000 women from

conquered lands to serve as sex slaves for its soldiers.

While Tokyo has since issued a verbal apology to these "comfort women," it has steadfastly ignored their claims for reparations. Coincidentally, 15 Asian women sued the Japanese government just this week in US court in their latest effort to recover damages for abuses committed against them.

In the late 1960s through the 1970s, Japanese men gained notoriety throughout Asia for "sex tours," and many Japanese companies even offered "weekend sex holidays" in Thailand, the Philippines, and South Korea for their employees' yearly bonuses.

Such practices generated strong criticism from around

the region. As a result, the Yakuza and other criminal enterprises moved to import women into Japan itself, and the number of foreign women recruited into the sex industry soared to the current levels.

Typically, women from Thailand originally come to Japan after being promised jobs as waitresses or factory workers or in the belief that they would be highly paid as entertainers or sex workers. Once in the country, however, they find themselves saddled with huge debts - usually 25,000 dollars to 40,000 dollars - and "forced to work under brutal conditions without compensation until they are released," according to the report.

In most cases, trafficked

women are compelled to work off their debts as bar "hostesses" who accompany clients to nearby hotels to perform sexual services, according to the report. They are not able to refuse clients, or insist on the use of a condom, or even seek medical care without their employer's consent.

Moreover, while they remain in debt, many women are kept under constant surveillance - often by video cameras - and motion-sensitive lights - and forced to satisfy all customer demands, the report says. Disobedience often leads to fines, physical violence, or even "resale" to third parties at higher levels of debt. If they contact the authorities, they usually face deportation, according to the report.

Pak central bank cancels Indus Bank licence

KARACHI, Sept 23: Pakistan's central bank said yesterday it had cancelled the licence of a small commercial bank for allegedly violating key prudential regulations and threatening depositors' money, says Reuters.

State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) governor Ishtar Hussain said in a statement the decision was taken after the Indus Bank Limited, which has seven branches in the country, failed to explain reasons for breaching rules governing the banking sector.

The SBP also said in a circular issued later that it had also appointed a provisional manager who would take over all books, property and claims of the bank.

No comment was immediately available from Indus Bank on the action, which was the first of its kind in Pakistan's banking history, although the central bank has in the past taken over the management of three commercial banks.

Officials said personnel of the state Federal Investigation Agency, which investigates white-collar crime, and inspectors of the central bank had been sent to different branches of the bank.

On facts and information available before me, I am clearly of the opinion that the affairs of the Indus Bank are, and also likely to be, conducted in a manner detrimental to the interests of its present and future depositors," Hussain said.

"The above are some of the reasons ... which require the licence granted to Indus Bank should be cancelled," he said.

Indus Bank's share price closed 30 paisas down at 2.85 rupees on Friday at the Karachi Stock Exchange, where it has been listed since 1992 with a paid-up capital of 500 million rupees (\$8.6 million).

Emirates voted Best Long-Haul Business Airline

Emirates has been voted the world's Best Long-Haul Business Airline by readers of the prestigious travel magazine, Conde Nast Traveller, says a press release.

In its citation, the Readers' Travel Awards 2000 noted: "Emirates deserves pole position for its punctuality/efficiency, pre- and post-flight facilities, catering and in-flight entertainment."

The international airline of the United Arab Emirates was joined on the podium by Virgin Atlantic and Singapore Airlines, who came second and third, respectively.

Emirates was also placed ninth in the 'Best of the Best' Top 100, based on the overall percentage of readers' satisfaction with facilities of service companies such as hotels, car rental, cruise liners, airlines, etc. Emirates was the only airline in the top 30.

Readers' replies were collated and analysed by an independent market research company.

The awards ceremony was held at London's Victoria and Albert Museum, compared by top British Comedian Griff Rhys Jones.