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All set for Rajshahi Chamber polls Jan 11

From Abdul Wadood

RAJSHAHI, Jan 7: After an eight-year deadlock, the elections to the Executive Committee (EC) of Rajshahi Chamber of Commerce and Industry (RCCI) is going to be held on January 11.

Two panels – Sammilita Babsayee Parishad, which is dominated by pro-BNP businessmen, and Farooque Chowdhury Parshad led mainly by pro-Awami League people, are contesting the polls. A pro-Jamaat and a few nonpolitical people are also in this panel.

The ruling Awami League and the main opposition BNP have directly involved themselves in the elections.

The election campaigns have already got momentum. The candidates and their supporters are moving door to door of the voters. The city has been flooded with colourful banners, posters, festoons and gates.

However, the voters have been confused as there is a rumour that the election would be postponed. In the past, RCCI elections had been postponed several times for filing of cases by some members.

Meanwhile, both the panels are accusing each other of creating terrorism, removing of posters and making false voters.

A total of 3578 voters will cast their votes in the election to elect 12 members of the EC of RCCI. The elected EC will elect the RCCI president later.

IMF executive dir meets PM, finance minister

Visiting executive director of the International Monitory Fund (IMF) Vijay Kelkar made a courtesy call on Finance Minister Shah AMS Kibria at his office yesterday, says UNB.

This is the first visit of Kelkar to Bangladesh after his assumption to the office.

He discussed with the minister about more suitable role of the IMF for the developing countries.

Meanwhile Vijay Kelkar also called on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at her office.

Finance Secretary Dr Akbar Ali Khan was present in both the meetings.

Japan to scrap oil refining regulation

TOKYO, Jan 7: Japan will scrap oil refining regulations by March next year but maintain authority to control reserves in case of emergency, reports said Sunday, reports AFP.

The ministry of economy, trade and industry plans to submit a bill to replace the 39-year-old Petroleum Industry Law to parliament scheduled to be convened in late January, the Yomiuri Shimbun said.

The new law would remove all barriers for local and foreign firms wishing to enter Japan's oil industry.

Under the new law, the government will stop projecting demand for petroleum products and give up mapping out an annual supply scheme that serves as a basis for production plans refiners are required to present, the daily said.

The new law will also end a license requirement for firms entering the business, it said.

The ministry hopes the bill will pass through parliament this year and take effect by March 2002, it said.

But the new law will still require oil refiners to maintain reserves at home and allow the government to control them in case oil prices rise sharply.

Japanese oil refining firms currently keep sufficient reserves to meet national demand for at least 70 days.

New vice-chairman of Meghna Ins

Col. Md. Abdul Matin (Retd.) has been elected Vice Chairman of Meghna Insurance Company Limited unanimously at a meeting of the Board of Directors of the company held at its head office, says a press release.

He obtained Masters degree in Defence Studies. He started his career in Defence Service on September 19, 1971 as a Commissioned Officer.

He served as DCMPO in UN Force Headquarters in Somalia.

Ctg Port gets new equipment for speedy cargo handling

From Our Correspondent

CHITTAGONG, Jan 7: Thirty-one different types of newly-procured equipment have been added to the strength of Chittagong Port yesterday for speedy and increased cargo handling.

State Minister for Shipping Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury Maya formally inaugurated the operation of these equipment procured at the cost of Tk 25.5 crore from the port's own fund at a ceremony held at jettyNo. 2 compound yesterday afternoon.

The newly-procured equipment include two mobile cranes, each with a capacity of 50 tons, ten 10-ton capacity mobile cranes, sixteen 25-ton capacity industrial tractors and three 50-ton capacity tractor trailer units. The Chittagong Port Authority (CPA) procured these equipment from the US, India and Sri Lanka through international tenders.

While inaugurating the operation of the equipment as chief guest, the minister said that the present government will keep its efforts for modernising the port and bringing dynamism in its activities as part of the continued development. Chaired by CPA Chairman Comodor Golam Robbani, the inaugural ceremony was also addressed by Shipping Secretary Sohel Ahmed as the special guest and acting member (Engineering), CPA Abdur Rashid.

The speakers said that with the procurement of these new machinery the port will now go beyond its limitations in handling single cargo package weighing over 30 tons and will enjoy speedy handling.

They said Chittagong Port handled a record amount of 1.7 lakh MT of cargo and 4 lakh 7 thousand TEUS containers last year, which was 12 per cent higher than the amount handled in the previous year.

Saying that the country had a 27 per cent increase in export last year and around 80 per cent of export and import is done through this port, they called upon the concerned authorities for providing all round support for export enhancement.

Picture shows speakers at a discussion on 'Promotion of Economic Development through Digital Governance and IT Culture' held at the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) Bhaban in the city yesterday.

IT can arrest $100m power sector system loss

Ex-PDB chairman says at discussion in city

Star Business Report

System loss in power sector costing more than 100 million US dollars can be checked through application of information technology (IT), former Power Development Board (PDB) Chairman Quamrul Islam Siddique said yesterday.

He said that the pilferage can be detected by using 'transducers' in the power distribution line.

"Power supply through each feeder can be converted into digital signals and certain software can be used for detecting its loss side by side taking measures to stop such leakage," Siddique, currently serving as Secretary of Ministry of Housing and Public Works, told a discussion session on *Promotion of Economic Development through Digital Governance and IT Culture* held at the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) Bhaban in the city.

He also observed that IT can create enormous employment opportunities for the country.

In his welcome speech, LGED Chief Engineer Md Shahidul Hassan said that the Department currently manages 67 rural and urban development projects with an annual outlay of some US$ 400 million and a manpower of more than 15,000.

"In order to efficiently manage its activities, LGED has become the pioneer in using IT. The Department has established local area network (LAN) connecting more than 300 computers at its headquarters," Hassan said.

He said that IT can play a significant role in the socio-economic development of a country. "It's also gaining gradual recognition by the government of Bangladesh."

While making the keynote presentation, Dr Saifur Rahman, Director of Alexandria Research Institute and Professor of Virginia Tech, USA, said that there should be a common objective and the government and academicians should form a consortium to formulate plans and implement them accordingly.

Rahman said that a broadband infrastructure has to be built for domestic network, which should, in intern, be connected for international access. He also called for developing a domestic IT market which will provide application opportunities for the service providers.

He said that the experience in domestic market development will help create experts and launch joint ventures, which, in the long run, will improve quality and productivity.

BGMEA polls 2001-2002

Sammilita Parishad declares united participation

The Sammilita Parishad of BGMEA has declared their united participation in the 2001-2002 election, says UNB.

"We had to face defeat in the election in 1999 due to misunderstanding among ourselves...we are now united," Parishad leader Redwan Ahmed, who was BGMEA president for three terms, told a press conference at Hotel Sonargaon yesterday.

Former president of the apex apparel trade body Mostafa Gulam Quddus, present Senior Vice-president Engr Nurul Huq Sikder and Parishad coordinator Engr Kutubuddin Ahmed were present in the press conference.

The candidates were not disclosed at the press conference for constitutional bar, but Redwan Ahmed announced that their panel would nominate new leaderships for the February elections instead of old faces.

"The new leadership will be competent enough to lead the garment sector while suggestions from the old leadership will be readily available to face the challenges emerging out of globalisation," he said.

Sikder, the lone representative of the Parishad on the present executive committee of BGMEA alleged that the present committee misused Tk 80 lakh for foreign trips from a fund of Tk 7 crore which the Quddus committee had raised to construct BGMEA complex.

Explaining his experience with the present committee, he also alleged that the present president and vice-president Benajir Ahmed, who is also president of Dhaka Chamber, also misused the BGMEA funds, Tk 24,000 each, for joining ICC conference in Dhaka recently.

Three groups have emerged till date to contest the BGMEA polls. Besides the existing two groups – Forum of the present leadership and Sammilita Parishad – another grouping under nomenclature Progressive Forum emerged as a third force in the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association.

Rahimafrooz starts Customer Registration Programme

Rahimafrooz has started Customer Registration Programme as part of its continuous effort to provide better customer service with value-added features, says a press release.

At the initial stage, the Customer Registration Programme will entitle the existing Lucas passenger car battery customers to 24-month extended warranty upon registration.

This offer will be valid for car batteries purchased between March 1, 1999 and January 31, 2001.

The registered customers will be treated as the privileged customers of the company and would be entitled to special offers for other products of the company.

Consumers Rights Protection Bill likely in next JS session

Move targeted at market regulation

The Consumers Rights Protection Bill 2001, drafted by the Ministry of Commerce as the first-ever move to regulate the market and protect the consumers interest, is likely to be placed before the forthcoming session of the Jatiya Sangsad, says BSS.

The objective of the bill, relevant sources told BSS, is to protect the consumers from health hazards and insecurity, safeguard the interest of the trade and industry and consumers from illegal, corrupt, misleading and bad practices and uphold the rights of traders as well as ensure the quality and quantity of products and services.

The bill is to propose the formation of National Consumers Rights Protection Commission, District Commission and Consumers Interest Protection Cell.

The draft of the bill proposes a chairman of the National Commission, who will be a Supreme Court retired judge or similarly qualified person and 15 other members including seven representatives from different related ministries, divisions and agencies.

The presidents of FBCCI, MCCI, BFUJ and CAB will be ex-officio members of the National Commission which will have one lady member nominated by the Women Affairs Ministry and two others by the government.

Th Chairman of the National Commission will be the chief executive and a joint secretary ranked-government official nominated by the government will serve as its member-secretary as per the proposed bill. The commission, if necessary, can also co-opt maximum four members including one woman.

According to the provisions of the draft bill, the Commission may constitute five-member bench from among its members to hear the complaints of the consumers and give verdict and send to the full commission for its final decision.

A ten-member District Consumers Rights Protection Commission will be formed in each district with a retired District Judge as its head to safeguard the interests of consumers. The district-level bench will be constituted with three members.

A store employee (C) applies lip-liner to a girl's face (R) next to a large photographic beauty poster advertisement (L) promoting foreign cosmetic products at a department store in downtown Shanghai yesterday. China is one of the fastest growing consumer goods markets in the world and attracts many foreign cosmetic brands spending huge amounts of money promoting products and image to Chinese women. – AFP photo

Experts urge govt to refurbish telecom infrastructure

ICECE '01 for linking villages with fibre optic network

Scores of information technology (IT) and communication experts have urged the Bangladesh government to refurbish its existing telecommunications infrastructure immediately along with linking all the villages with fibre optic networks to prepare the country for third generation (3G) cellular phones and high speed data communication, says BSS.

The appeal was made at the technical sessions of the International Conference on Electrical and Computer Engineering (ICECE 2001) at Sonargaon Hotel in the city on the concluding day yesterday.

Twenty-five professionals from USA, UK, Japan, Australia, Singapore, Malaysia, Finland, Sweden and India took part in the conference. Some 100 academicians and engineers from the host Bangladesh also participated.

The topics discussed in the technical sessions included Bangla numeric digit recognition by weight smoothing feed forward neutral network, qualitative analysis of holographic and algorithmic approach through neural network for pattern recognition, development of on-line accounting system for consumers under a distribution transformer, telecommunication for new millenium: model for community Lan (Local Area Network), efficient decoding technique for Huffman codes and software development for designing small power transformers.

In special session in the morning Professor Muhammad Zafar Iqbal of Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST) presented paper on the overall state of IT in Bangladesh while engineer Mahmud Hossain of Grameen Phone elaborated on the state of cellular telephony in the country.

Prof Zafar Iqbal said the volume of software export from Bangladesh in the year 2000 was 2.5 million US dollars. Quoting Prof. Yunus he said the vision to establish IT village should be abandoned instead we should try to build a IT country.

The professor, who is famous as one of the leading IT experts of the country, opined that all villages across the country should be connected with optic fibre networks and education in the IT sector is far more important than connecting the country with submarine cables.

"High speed data communication is no magic and if won't solve problems relating to complexities of software development. We need efficient programmers and without the world class programmers all our efforts in IT sector would be proved as foolish enterprise," the IT expert said.

He said future developments in the filed of 3G cellular telephony, data communication and all IT-enabled services including internet depends on some parameters like teledensity, necessary bandwidth and channels.

Prof. Zafar Iqbal said: "Our country encounters severe image problem abroad and often the foreigners associate our land with natural disasters and other calamities. We should launch endeavours to portray our land as a land of innovative programmers", he said.

Mahmud Hossain of Grameen Phone said over 256,840 people across Bangladesh subscribes cellular phones. They are enjoying GSM, AMPS and CDMA systems from four organizations – Grameen Phone, Pacific Bangladesh Telecom Limited (PBTL), Telecom Malaysia International Bangladesh (TMIB) and Sheba Telecom.

He said recently two companies named Bangladesh Broadcasting and Telecommunication Technologies (BBTT) and Global One have been given licenses for operating Personal Handyphone System (PHS) and Digital Enhanced Cordless Telephone (DECT) technologies.

The GP engineer said the new call traffic generated by the cellular networks has created serious interconnection problem with the fixed network of Bangladesh Telephone and Telegraph Board (BTTB).

"The number of interconnecting circuits between the cellular operators and BTTB has been quite inadequate. The shortage of the interconnecting circuits with the BTTB has been one of the major reasons for slow growth of cellular telephone until 1999," he said adding the BTTB is showing reluctance to increase its interconnection capacity.

He said other problems in this sector includes frequent failure of commercial power supply, inadequacy of frequency allocated to three GSM operators, absence of national numbering plan, lack of efficient protocols and absence of an independent telecommunication regulatory authority.

The GP telecommunication export said cellular technology is moving from its second to third generation products.

Indian corporations flocking to Allahabad to showcase goods

NEW DELHI, Jan 7: Marketing executives flogging everything from soap to a new drink called "Nirvana" will compete for space with tens of millions of pilgrims at the world's largest religious gathering in northern India this month, says AFP.

Indian corporations are eyeing the 42-day Maha Kumbh Mela (Great Kumbh Fair), which begins in the city of Allahabad on Tuesday, as a perfect opportunity to launch a whole range of new products.

"Died-in-the-wool marketing companies with anything from soft drinks to soaps to plug will be there at the fair," said Deepak Jolly, corporate communications chief from Pepsi Foods Limited's Delhi headquarters.

"It is literally a heaven-sent business opportunity."

The Maha Kumbh Mela takes place every 12 years in Allahabad, where, according to Hindu legend, the nectar of immortality spilled to earth during an epic battle between gods and demons.

The pilgrimage has marketing executives drooling because at its peak, the event will draw 30 million Hindu devotees – roughly the population of Canada.

"We had no problem auctioning sites to corporations to put up hospitality stalls, phone booths and even first aid tents," said Allahabad commissioner Sadakant, who is also one of the Kumbh Mela organisers.

"But we have asked everyone not to go to town with loud posters and hoardings. Companies can have their promotions and product launches, but they must keep the place tidy."

Consumer goods giant Hindustan Lever Ltd which prides itself of being "present" at every Kumbh Mela, plans to test launch a low-priced soap at the fair, according to company officials.

Other firms are also jumping on the Kumbh bandwagon.

"We will launch a coconut-based drink called Nirvana during the Kumbh Mela," said Atul Sood, director of Bremby Beverages. "We plan to give visitors to our stall a free drink. Perhaps even win a few converts."

The Kumbh Mela has got television networks equally excited, with several broadcasters looking to acquire exclusive rights to beam the event into Indian households.

Lloyds TSB seeks regulatory approval for Abbey Nat'l bid

LONDON, Jan 7: British bank Lloyds TSB pressed ahead with its hostile bid for home-loan specialist Abbey National on Friday, when it sought regulatory approval for the offer, reports AFP.

The bid threatens to topple the planned merger of Abbey National and Bank of Scotland, which submitted their own merger plans to authorities last month.

Abbey National has rejected two offers from Lloyds.

The competition authorities now have 20 working days in which to report their conclusions on the Lloyds bid to Trade and Industry Secretary Stephen Byers for his decision on whether to refer the deal to the Competition Commission for further scrutiny.

No immediate scheme for Japan stimulus package

TOKYO, Jan 7: A key figure of Japan's ruling coalition on Sunday denied it had any immediate plans to introduce a new stimulus package despite growing concerns over the nation's fragile economy, reports AFP.

"It is true that the economy is not in a comfortable position," Makoto Koga, secretary general of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), said in a television interview.

"But right now, I am not considering an extra budget or anything like that," said the number two in the powerful LDP, led by Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori.

Concerns have deepened over the sluggish economy as stock prices had been declining and recent economic indicators showed worse-than-expected results.

In a New Year address, Mori vowed to stick to his spending policy this year, saying: "The economy is in a position where one more push is needed."

On Friday, Japanese business leaders forecast the economy would grow by up to two per cent this year.

But "our concern is how seriously the slump in Japanese stock prices and the slowdown in the US economy and in Southeast Asia would hit Japan," said Hiroshi Okuda, chairman of Japan Federation of Employers Associations.

The key Nikkei index on the Tokyo Stock Exchange lost 27.5 per cent over the course of 2000, falling last week to 13,423.21, its lowest close since January 13, 1999.

In the interview, Koga expressed his readiness to shift his focus to a cut in growing national debts.

"The government must show a blue print of its fiscal reform to cut the "enormous" debts," Koga said.

"Let us do it," he said. "This is our responsibility."

In October, Japan announced an economic revival package worth 11 trillion yen (95 billion dollars), on top of 100 trillion yen spent over the past decade to stimulate spending and revive the economy.