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DHAKA, THURSDAY, JANUARY 11, 2001

Hyundai Cement conducts Mason Contact Program

Hyundai Cement (Bangladesh), a company of Holderbank-Switzerland, recently concluded the first in the series of month-long, city-wide campaigns titled "Mason Contact Program," says a press release. The "Mason Contact Program" marks yet another innovative marketing scheme launched by Hyundai Cement, and is part of the dynamic and customer-focused marketing strategies being implemented by the company. The programme has been launched in an effort to further strengthen Hyundai Cement's market leadership status, and to take on a more active role in the overall technical and professional development of the skilled workforce in the cement/construction industry of Bangladesh. The programme, designed specifically to target Masons and other skilled labourers, aimed to impart specialised knowledge regarding cement application, mixing and usage to them and build brand awareness and highlight product superiority of Hyundai Cement.

It was conducted by an especially set up mobile working team comprising Hyundai Cement officials drawn from various organisational functions. The participants included Sved Tareq Ali, Deputy General Manager (Marketing), Niaz Mahmud, Coordinator, and Sales Managers, Badruzzaman Tareq and Ferdousur Rahman.

The programme covered all major mason collection points in the city, including Magbazar, Hanraipool, Mohakhali, and Gulshan Badda areas. Each colorful event concluded with distribution of Hyundai Cement T-shirts among the Masons and other labourers.

Key US lawmaker for releasing \$585m to UN

WASHINGTON, Jan 10: A key US lawmaker yesterday announced he would support releasing \$585 million dollars toward paying down US dues to the United Nations, reports AFP.

Senator Jesse Helms of the Foreign Relations Committee said he was willing to support the release after the UN General Assembly approved a resolution last month lowering US contributions from 25 per cent to 22 per cent of the UN's regular budget. "On the basis of what was achieved, I'm prepared to accept (that) \$585 million dollars to be released."

That dollar amount will be the second and most important tranche the US is to pay, having paid 100 million dollars last year. A final tranche is due by the end of 2001, early 2002. As of October 31, the United States owed the world the total body 1.586 billion dollars, according to UN calculations. Helms and Senator Joe Biden, also present at the hearing, were co-authors of legislation passed by the US Congress that linked payment of US arrears to a lower share of the UN budget.

US ambassador to the UN, Richard Holbrooke, with only 10 days left in his tenure before President-elect George W Bush ushers in a new administration, at the meeting tipped his hat to Argentina, South Korea, Russia and China for their contribution to the deal.

LEADS to computerise C&AG Office

The Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) of Bangladesh has signed a contract with LEADS Corporation Limited for supply, installation, testing and commissioning of hardware & network products as well as designing, developing and implementing application software for different Directorates of C&AG, says a press release.

LEADS will operate the system for a year and train the C&AG personnel before handing over the system. However, LEADS will remain responsible for smooth transfer of the technology. Kamrul Hai, Controller General of Accounts (CGA) and National Project Director, Strengthening the C&AG Office Project (STAG), and Shaikh Abdul Aziz, Managing Director of LEADS Corporation Limited, signed the contract in the presence of Md Motaher Hossain, Deputy Comptroller and Auditor General of Bangladesh recently.

STAG is a UNDP funded project. Under the contract, LEADS Corporation Limited, one of the major information technology vendors of the country, will provide total IT solution for the entire Audit Department. LEADS will develop a web-based setup with Bangla database connectivity, which will enable the authorised users of the network to access the server like a normal internet site.

NBR to honour top tax payers with VIP titles

List for the eligible already prepared

By Inam Ahmed

The National Board of Revenue (NBR) has taken an initiative to honour the top ten income-tax-paying individuals and top five companies as VIPs based on their paid tax amount during 1998-99 fiscal year, according to sources.

The Board has already drawn up a list of the persons and companies to be honoured and sent the names to the Finance Ministry for concurrence. The list will then be sent to the Bangladesh Bank and the Home Ministry for their clearance.

According to the NBR criteria, loan defaulters or individuals with moral meanness will not qualify for the honour. The central bank and the Home Ministry will see whether the selected persons and companies have defaulted on loans or if they had ever been convicted in any case. The winners will get laminated VIP cards issued by the NBR with a one-year validity, and the holders of such cards will enjoy various facilities. One

of the VIPs will be included in the NBR advisory committee and will get entry pass to Bangladesh Secretariat. The VIPs will also be invited to national functions and civic receptions given by the City Corporation. They will also get priority in getting appointments with high government officials both in and outside the country. The Foreign Ministry will write 'note verbal' to foreign missions with a view to facilitating visas for the VIPs and the Bangladesh missions abroad will also offer them all sorts of cooperation during their foreign trips. The VIPs will get priority in getting medical treatment at government hospitals for themselves, their spouses and children. They will also be entitled to VIP quotas in booking Bangladesh Biman and railway tickets. They will also be able to use the VIP lounges in airports and get special baggage handling facility.



Members of Hyundai Cement Mobile Working Team at a "Mason Contact Program" session. — Hyundai Cement photo.

IMF MD meets Asia's top bankers in S'pore

SINGAPORE, Jan 10: International Monetary Fund managing director Horst Koehler was in Singapore on Wednesday to meet representatives of private Asian banks, an IMF official said, reports Reuter.

The meeting, part of Koehler's initiative to forge closer cooperation with the private sector, was the first held in Asia after a similar meeting in New York last June, soon after he took over the helm at the IMF.

The meeting was part of the IMF's effort to have regular consultation with key private sector people, a local IMF official told Reuters. He said most of the participants were from top banks from around the region. Koehler was scheduled to leave for Hong Kong later in the day and would proceed to Japan from there, the official said.

He is due to hold a press conference on Friday at the Japan National Press Club and will also attend the two-day Asia-Europe Meeting starting on Saturday in Kobe.

Indonesia expects moderate growth this year

JAKARTA, Jan 10: Indonesia's central bank today forecast the economy would grow a moderate 4.5 to 5.5 per cent this year, and predicted a firming of the embattled rupiah currency, reports Reuters.

The gross domestic product, announced by officials at a news conference, was above an average rate of 4.21 per cent forecast by 10 research houses polled by Reuters last month.

Indonesia's budget prediction five per cent for this year, while the finance minister has said the rate could be as high as 5.5-6.0 per cent. The central bank estimated growth last year at 5.0 per cent, compared to its previous forecast of 4.5 per cent and virtually zero in 1999. The latest Reuters poll showed 4.5 per cent in 2000.

But the economy still has some way to go to recover from the deep recession in 1998, when GDP shrank more than 13 per cent.

Malaysia minister sees stronger stock market

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 10: Malaysian Finance Minister Daim Zaiduddin has predicted that the country's sluggish stock market will pick up after an ethnic Chinese lobby group suspended demands that had angered the majority Malay population, news reports said Sunday, reports AP.

"Now that the matter is solved, the people, especially foreign investors, will see that the country is stable and there are no problems," Daim was quoted as saying by the New Sunday Times newspaper.

The Malaysian Chinese Election Appeal Committee, or Satiau on Friday announced it would withdraw its demands that all races in Malaysia enjoy equal privileges to forestall ethnic tensions.

The organisation, which claims to represent about 2,000 associations, had been criticised by nearly every top government leader for allegedly endangering Malaysia's fragile racial harmony with the demand.

The Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange's benchmark Composite Index, which tracks 100 blue-chip stocks, on Friday rose 6.31 points, or 0.95 per cent, to 670.18 following Suqin's announcement.

The Chinese group had initially insisted that the government revised its 30-year-old affirmative action policies, which mostly benefit ethnic Malays, were outdated.

India studies series of radical reforms to boost growth

NEW DELHI, Jan 10: The Indian government, seeking to boost economic growth, is studying a series of radical reforms including liberalising the financial sector and opening up services from power distribution to railways to private business, according to a government discussion paper, reports Reuters.

The paper said far-reaching reforms are required to bring economic growth from around 5.5 per cent now to nine per cent — a level many economists believe is needed to put the economy on a sound footing.

Among reforms it suggests are privatisation of at least a couple of major public sector banks, handing over management control of all weak banks to private banks and relaxation of limits on foreign investment in the financial sector.

It also suggests a rise in user charges on infrastructure services and energy, higher rail passenger prices, the introduction of private pensions for new government employees, and tight controls on state spending by the central government.

Other proposals include dissolving state electricity boards and privatising power distribution, privatising ports, airports and expressways, and allowing private rail companies to be set

up which would pay to use the existing rail network. A senior government official, who did not wish to be identified, said the issues outlined in the paper would be discussed at the "highest level" in the coming weeks to thrash out a consensus and take appropriate steps.

The government is currently working on plans for the annual budget, due to be presented to parliament at the end of February.

Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha, a big advocate of economic reforms, has vowed to take strong measures to boost growth in the annual budget.

Calls for radical reforms are, however, common both from within and outside the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA), led by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

But in reality the government has traditionally moved cautiously to avoid a popular backlash which might rock the coalition government.

It now faces a tough balancing act in this year's budget to get the economy moving again without provoking too much dissent.

After an initial spell of success in spurring growth following its election in October 1999,

the government now faces a slowing economy hit by high oil prices and a weak rupee. Fatchy monsoon rains have also lowered agriculture output.

Analysts say India's economy, one of the world's fastest expanding over the last decade, could end up among the slowest growing in Asia if strong steps are not taken to boost growth, including bid cuts in public spending and the government deficit.

The government paper argued that reforms were needed to bring the general government fiscal deficit to around five per cent within three to five years from more than nine per cent now.

Financial bodies seek faster privatisation

Another report says: Representatives of Indian financial institutions urged the government yesterday to rev up its privatisation programme to boost the stock market. "We have urged the government for large-scale privatisation of profitable state-run firms," Anand Rathi, president of the Bombay Stock Exchange told reporters after a pre-budget meeting with Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha.

CHAKRA PRASAD BASTOLA FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF NEPAL



Nepalese Foreign Minister Chakra Prasad Bastola addresses a meeting at the FBCCI auditorium in the city yesterday. FBCCI President Yussuf Abdullah Haroon is also seen. — Star photo

Nepal FM sees ample scope for trade with Bangladesh

Star Business Report

Visiting Nepalese Foreign Minister Chakra Prasad Bastola finds ample opportunities for trade, investment and technical collaboration between Bangladesh and Nepal.

Bastola said an export basket of raw silk, chemicals, pharmaceutical products, fish and leather goods to Nepal in a larger quantity, the Nepalese minister said yesterday while addressing a gathering of businessmen at the FBCCI auditorium.

On the other hand, Nepal can export vegetables and fruits during the rainy season, dairy products, cement boulders and other consumer goods at competitive prices to Bangladesh, he added. Bastola however stressed the need for strengthening the bilateral ties between the two countries instead of depending on co-operation under the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC).

"We always thought of co-operation under SAARC, but we never tried to strengthen relationship on a bilateral basis which offers a lot of opportunities," Chakra Prasad Bastola said.

"We are now using the Kolkata port and we can also use the Mongla port. But the Nepalese businessmen do not know how to reach Mongla," he said, stressing development of infrastructure in Bangladesh.

Responding to a question, he said high tariff was a barrier to exporting vegetables and primary goods from Nepal to Bangladesh. Nepal has surplus milk which it can supply to Bangladesh at cheaper rates. There are vast untapped opportunities for promoting trade as well as industrial joint ventures, he said.

In this regard, the Nepalese foreign minister underscored the need for fully utilising the transit route via Bangladesh in order to promote trade between the two countries. He further said that both the governments should ensure a conducive environment, remove all hurdles and encourage promotional efforts through appropriate policy measures.

FBCCI President Yusuf Abdullah Haroon also spoke on the occasion. Putting stress on consolidating regional co-operation, the

FBCCI president said, "Unless the countries in the SAARC region strengthen co-operation and fortify their position as an economic power bloc, there is every possibility that we shall be swamped by other powerful blocs in world trade and economy."

Haroon said that the business community of Bangladesh strongly believed that bilateral relationship between the two countries could be translated into a mutually rewarding partnership, generating rich dividends.

He mentioned that an agreement has been signed between the Federation of Nepal Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FNCCI) and FBCCI last year for promoting co-operation between the two countries.

Besides, a joint taskforce comprising the members of FNCCI and FBCCI was also formed to discuss various aspects of Nepal-Bangladesh trade and transit, he noted. "We should activate this agreement and have frequent interactions between the two sides to promote trade and investment co-operation," Haroon said.

BGMEA ELECTION-2001 Members Council

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Muzaffar U Siddique, leader of Members' Council panel contesting the BGMEA election-2001, speaks at a press conference held at Sonargaon Hotel yesterday. — Star photo

Wavering oil awaiting US stock data, OPEC cuts

LONDON, Jan 10: Oil prices wavered yesterday as traders awaited the release of US stock figures and eyed an expected output cut by the OPEC producers cartel, reports Reuters.

London's Brent blend ended 16 cents firmer at \$24.59 a barrel in late trading, recovering slightly from a bout of selling which lopped 74 cents from North sea values on Monday. US light crude was 32 cents stronger at \$27.64 a barrel.

Traders said they were awaiting the release of the latest weekly inventory data from the American Petroleum Institute (API) after the close of the day's trading to give fresh price direction.

Analysts polled before the release of the figures forecast a one million barrel build in crude stocks. They also expected a rise in distillates and gasoline inventories. Prices lost their lustre after a five-day rally faltered on Monday when traders began to factor in expectations that the OPEC producers' cartel would slash output next week.

"We recovered on ACCESS (after-hours) trade, though there was no real fresh fundamental news to move the market. OPEC talk continues about the production cuts, but we'll have to wait and see," BNP

Paribas Commodity Futures Inc analyst and trader Tom Bentz said on Tuesday OPEC officials have said recently there is consensus among the cartel's 11 members to curb output to shore up prices in time for a spring thaw.

Secretary-General Ali Rodriguez said on Sunday OPEC would cut crude supplies when it meets in Vienna on January 17, but added it had not decided by how much.

OPEC's biggest producer, Saudi Arabia, said last week that it saw a consensus building for its recommendation of a 1.5 million barrels per day (bpd) reduction.

"That's certainly what the market expects," said a London oil dealer.

Price hawks in OPEC are still hoping that the cartel might do even more.

Reports that any potential OPEC cut would be in force by February 1 and that the cartel's second largest producer Iran was preparing for lower volumes helped sustain prices.

Oil would begin to flow soon. Exports ground to a halt after customers refused to stump up cash for an illegal surcharge levied by Iraq which contravenes UN sanctions.

UN officials, who monitor movements of Iraqi oil under the oil-for-food programme adopted following Baghdad's 1990 invasion of Kuwait said on Monday for the Gulf port of Mina al-Bakr, one of two outlets for Iraqi crude.

Industry sources also said the Gulf port would be back in business on Wednesday, confirming two Basral Light crude oil loadings.

Two other tankers would also leave the port, but despite the emergence of spot offers, oil majors were steering clear of Iraqi exports into Europe, traders said on Tuesday. Companies were unwilling to cross the United Nations by touching cargoes tainted by the illegal surcharge, they added. There were no vessels at the second export port of Ceyhan in Turkey, UN officials said.

Only one tanker has loaded Iraqi oil this month against total exports of roughly 16.5 million barrels in December when loadings were halted for 12 days.