

ASEAN considers giant East Asia-wide free trade zone

AFP, Bandar Seri Begawan

Southeast Asian leaders are to investigate establishing a mega East Asia free trade zone, covering more than two billion people and taking in China, Japan and South Korea, Brunei's Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah said at the end of a regional summit here Monday.

The proposal from an initiative by South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung was "bold yet feasible",

the sultan said after the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit with their three dialogue partners, China, Japan and South Korea.

An East Asia free trade bloc, which would swallow a China-ASEAN zone already under consideration, was contained in a list of proposals from the East Asia Vision Group set up in 1999 at Kim's urging.

"The report contains key pro-

posals and concrete measures to broaden East Asia cooperation," Sultan Hassanal told a press briefing at the end of the summit.

"Some are bold yet feasible such as establishing an East Asia Free Trade Area and liberalising trade well ahead of APEC's goals."

The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum has set a 2010 target to free up trade in developed nations and 2020 for developing economies.

ASEAN secretary general Rudolfo Severino said no final decision had been made on China's plan, first mooted at last year's ASEAN summit, but the leaders of the 10-nation body found it "interesting and worth pursuing".

A study group will report back to the next ASEAN summit in Cambodia in 2002 on the East Asia free trade zone, the sultan said.



PHOTO: BTI

Building Technology & Ideas Ltd (BTI), an ISO 9001 certified housing development company, recently held a pre-handover meeting of its Spring Leaf apartments at Gulshan in the city. Picture shows Engr F R Khan, DMD of BTI, addressing the meeting.

CURRENCY



PHOTO: NBL

Habibullah, Chairman of National Bank Limited, cuts ribbon to inaugurate the 72nd branch of the bank at Z H Sikder Women's Medical College in the city on Sunday. Zainul Haque Sikder, Moazzam Hossain, Ali Akbar Khan, Parveen Haque Sikder, Md Shamsuzzoha, Shahadat Hossain Salim, Directors, Mrs Z H Sikder, M Haider Chowdhury, Founding Managing Director, Rafiqul Islam Khan, Managing Director and Mustaq Ahmed, Deputy Managing Director of the bank, are also seen in the picture.

NBL branch opens at ZH Sikder Women's Medical College

National Bank limited (NBL) has opened a new branch at ZH Sikder Women's Medical College and Hospital at Rayer Bazar in the city on Sunday, says a press release.

Habibullah, chairman of the Board of Directors of the bank, inaugurated the branch.

It is the 72nd branch of the bank.

In his speech, the chairman of the bank said NBL is proud to open its branch at this Medical College which is devoted for humanity and welfare of the society.

Rafiqul Islam Khan, Managing Director of the bank said NBL with its excellent client service based on Information Technology has won the people's mind of the country.

Z H Sikder, Founder of the College & Hospital & Director of the bank, thanked the management of the bank for opening of the branch at the premises of the college.

M Haider Chowdhury, Founding Managing Director of the bank, Shahadat Hossain Salim and Md Shamsuzzoha, Directors of the bank, also spoke on the occasion.

OPEC may cut oil output by 1m bpd

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

The Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) may cut oil production by a million barrels a day (bpd) to boost prices, its secretary general said Monday.

OPEC ministers meeting on November 14 in Vienna would decide whether to slash output by a million bpd or more if prices plunged further, Ali Rodriguez told a press conference on the sidelines of an Association of Southeast Asian Nations oil conference here.

He said the outcome hinged on the cooperation of non-OPEC members in cutting output in a bid to boost prices that have slumped to two-year lows following the September 11 terror attacks on the United States.

"We will make some decisions in the next conference in Vienna. The

first is to ensure full compliance of our commitment (to market stabilisation), the second probably is to reduce production again by one million barrels a day," he said.

"But it is very important, extremely important (to have) the cooperation of non-OPEC producers... we need to reduce production again in order to balance the supply with the demand."

Under the present OPEC agreement, member nations are producing about 23 million bpd, he said.

Rodriguez described the current oversupply situation in the global oil market as "transitory" and said he believed the outlook would improve next year.

"We have no concerns about the medium term or long term but we have to fight the problem in the short term," he said.

ADB raises aid to Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) on Monday increased its aid to Pakistan this year to 950 million dollars, adding to international efforts to reward Pakistan's support for the anti-terrorism war.

The ADB is the latest in a line of

finance institutions, world powers and creditor nations acting to help Pakistan, whose frontline status in the campaign against the Taliban has battered its economy.

ADB president Tadao Chino announced the package after talks here with Pakistan's Finance Minister Shaukat Aziz.

Chino told a press conference that economic aid for Pakistan this year will be increased to 950 million dollars from the 626 million dollars originally planned before the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington.

"The recent and ongoing events in the region have greatly worsened the economic situation in Pakistan. In view of the added difficulties, I assured the government of Pakistan that we would do whatever we can to help," he said.

Aziz has estimated the US-led war against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan will cost Pakistan between one billion and 2.5 billion dollars in lost trade and other damage to the economy.

He told the press conference "we need support from our friends more than ever before."

Aziz said talks had also focused on the influx of Afghan refugees into Pakistan and the government's massive privatisation hoping to raise four billion dollars from sales of state oil firms, banks and others.

The minister said "we are determined to pursue our economic reforms as before. The main challenge we face now is to institutionalise what we are doing so that this continues over a long period of time."

Pakistan is a key member of the international anti-terrorism coalition, a neighbour of Afghanistan which allows the United States access to four bases and gives other logistical support.

But the war faces political opposition in Pakistan and has had a dramatic impact on the economy.

The central bank warned last week that gross domestic product (GDP) growth for the 2001-02 fiscal year could be cut from an expected four per cent to as low as 2.5 per cent because of the conflict.

It highlighted the increased exposure to risks and costs from backing the US-led campaign at a time when the economy had been showing signs of picking up.

But Pakistan could benefit from the lifting of economic sanctions by the United States, Japan and the European Union imposed after its nuclear tests in 1998 and greater economic assistance and access to foreign markets.

IBBL Executive Committee reconstituted

The Executive Committee of Islamic Bank Bangladesh Limited (IBBL) has been reconstituted with Mohammad Younus as its chairman, says a press release.

The reconstitution of the committee was made at a meeting of the Board of Directors of the bank held in the city on Thursday.

Shah Abdul Hannan, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the bank, presided over the meeting.

Other members of the Executive Committee are: Yousif Abdullah Al Rajhi, Representative of Al Rajhi Company for Industry & Trade, KSA, Professor Korkut Ozal, Representative of Islamic Development Bank (IDB), Jeddah, KSA, Engr Mohammad Fouad Al-Khateeb, KSA, Sheikh A Latif A Rahim Janahi, Representative of Bahrain Islamic Bank, Mohammad Mosharrar Hossain MP, ANMA Zaher Engr, Md Eskander Ali Khan and Engr Mustafa Anwar.

Earlier another meeting of the Board of Directors was held on October 31, 2001.

Iraq, Syria to set up nine joint venture cos

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq and Syria will set up nine joint-venture companies, Vice President Taha Yassin Ramadan said Sunday at the Baghdad Trade Fair.

"We are on the way to setting up nine joint companies," Ramadan told reporters at the Syrian stand, but gave no further details.

The vice-president described economic ties between the two neighbours as a "common market... in all sectors, without any restriction", following the launch of a free trade agreement in April.



PHOTO: BANOFUL

State Minister for Commerce Barkat Ullah inaugurates a showroom of Banoful Confectionery & Pastry Shop at Maghbazar in the city on Saturday. Banoful Managing Director Nazrul Islam Babul was also present on the occasion. On the day, three more showrooms of Banoful were also opened in city's Farm Gate, Rampura and Badda areas.

Japan's economic index points to prolonged slowdown

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's forward-looking index of economic activity for September plunged below the 50-point boom-bust line on the back of slack demand for houses and cars and would likely remain weak, the government said Monday.

The leading index of data pointing to economic activities in the next three to six months dropped to 37.5 points, against a revised 50.0 points in August, the Cabinet Office's economic and social research institute said.

"We expect the leading index to remain below the 50-point line as the positive effect of good housing starts data since July, due to the construction of a single apartment complex project, is waning," a government official said.

"The... trend is that it will stay below the 50-point line" regarded as the dividing mark between growth and contraction in the economy, he said.

Sluggish consumption across the board added to the pessimism, with September sales of new cars down 13.7 per cent from a month earlier, the official said.

"New car sales headed into negative territory from the previous month's 9.6 per cent rise. We need to closely watch future developments here."

The coincident index for September, which measures the economy's current state, came to 12.5 points against 0.0 points in August in its ninth consecutive month below 50 points.

This is its longest spell under the 50-point marker since a 17-month stint between August 1997 and

December 1998.

"The coincident index will likely continue below the 50-point line as the number of positive factors are decreasing amid the worsening employment situation," said the official.

"We have not yet changed our assessment for the coincident index. It is highly likely the economic situation has become even worse than before."

Japan's unemployment rate hit a post-war high of 5.3 per cent in September and is expected to rise further as the world's number two economy slides into its fourth recession in a decade, analysts said.

The government official noted the employment indicator for September dropped sharply for the second straight month, with the manufacturing sector suffering in particular, posting a 34.4-per cent drop in new job vacancies from a year earlier.

The leading index is based on a raft of financial figures which offer a pointer to the future of the economy, such as commodity indices, new car registrations and the number of new home building projects.

JP Morgan chief economist Masaaki Kanno said the figures would remain grim until well into next year as the impact of the terror attacks in the United States coupled with feeble economic conditions at home cloud hopes of a speedy turnaround.

"There is still a long way to go before we see a recovery. It is very volatile and in order to see a recovery... the leading index must (come in) for a couple of months above 50 points," he said.

"It will be below 50 points for quite a long time."



PHOTO: IBBL

Shah Abdul Hannan, Chairman of Islamic Bank Bangladesh Limited, presides over a meeting of the Board of Directors of the bank held in the city on Thursday.

