

Bank Asia holds annual confce

The Annual Conference-2002 of the managers, executives and officers of Bank Asia Limited was held in the city on Friday, says a press release.

M Syeduzzaman, Chairman, A Rouf Chowdhury, Vice-Chairman, and other members of the Board of Directors graced the occasion.

Syed Anisul Haq, Managing Director, of the Bank, spoke on the occasion. Khondoker Ibrahim Khaled, Managing Director of Publi Bank Ltd and former Deputy Governor of the Bangladesh Bank was also present on the occasion as guest speaker.

The activities and performances of the bank were reviewed in the conference and targets for the current year were discussed. The were in-depth discussions on the plans and strategies for improvement, expansion and diversification of the services of the bank.

It may be mentioned that the deposits of the bank increased to Tk 3916.24 million in 2001 from Tk 1534.46 in 2000, advances to Tk 3012.66 million in 2001 from Tk 1114.06 million in 2000, and profit to Tk 130.42 million in 2001 from Tk 20.00 million in the previous year.

Bank Asia, a new bank in the private sector, set a unique trend in the banking sector by acquiring the Bangladesh operations of two foreign banks namely the Bank of Nova Scotia, a Canadian Bank, and the Muslim Commercial Bank Ltd of Pakistan.

Oil price sags in lacklustre trading

AFP, London

The price of oil sagged here on Monday in lacklustre trading.

A barrel of Brent North Sea crude for March delivery eased to 19.61 dollars from 19.72 on Friday evening.

In New York, March-dated light sweet crude futures had climbed 62 cents on Friday to 20.26 dollars.

The Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries' (OPEC) basket price of seven crudes worldwide rose to 18.69 dollars on Friday from 18.20 on Thursday, the OPECNA news agency reported from Vienna.

Though it had no impact on prices, the market was mulling news that the Kuwaiti government had accepted Oil Minister Adel al-Sebeih's resignation over a recent deadly blast that sparked safety concerns in the vital industry.

Al Baraka Bank holds Dhaka area branch managers' conference

Al Baraka Bank Bangladesh Limited held Dhaka area branch managers' says a press release.

The meeting was presided over by A H M Shawkat Ali Chowdhury, - Executive President of the bank. Masum A Chowdhury, Chairman of the Board, attended the conference as chief guest while Abdul Matin Khan, Vice Chairman, Barrister M Moniruzzaman Khan, Director & Chairman of Executive Committee, and S S Nasim Afaz Chowdhury, - Director of the bank attended the conference as special guests.

The Conference reviewed the overall performance of the bank for the year 2001-Deposit, Investment & Foreign Exchange Business of the bank rose by 32.84, 10.91 and 5.88 per cent respectively compared to the year 2000.

The Chairman, in his address, advised the managers and officers of the bank to maintain high quality of service in all respects.

Asian govts to spend more on IT: IDC

AFP, Singapore

Governments in the Asia-Pacific region will invest more to embrace the benefits of information technology, with China seen spending the most, an industry monitor said Monday.

International Data Corp. (IDC) said of the five governments it has profiled, China is projected to increase spending at a compounded annual growth rate of nearly 40 per cent from 2001 to 2003.

Spending on keeping governments wired electronically is expected to increase by more than 20 per cent in Singapore and South Korea during the same period, and by 15 and 13 per cent respectively in Australia and Hong Kong, IDC said in a statement.

"By embracing technology, governments are finding they can reap the same type of rewards as e-businesses," said Lisa Shishido, a senior analyst on e-business and e-government with IDC.

Hand over water bodies to genuine fishermen

Association urges government

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Bangladesh Khudra Matsajibi Jeley Samiti, an association of small fishermen, yesterday urged the government to hand over water bodies to 'genuine fishermen'.

At a press conference held in the city, the association also demanded of the government to ensure the genuine fishermen's participation in the bidding of leasing the water bodies.

Anwar Hossain Sikdar, general secretary of the association, said although fisheries ministry has the expertise for the development of fishery industry, it has no control over the water bodies since these belong to other ministries.

He demanded the water bodies be handed over to fisheries ministry for speedy implementation of fishery projects.

In a move to eliminate unemployment among young people, the government handed over khas

jalmahal (disputed water bodies) measuring 20 acres to the ministry of youth in 1998 but the initiative left the grassroots fishermen jobless, virtually depriving them of fishing right in those water bodies.

Worst still, though the government abolished the leasing system of the khas water bodies in 1995, rest of about 10,400 khas water bodies measuring over 20 acres were leased to different NGOs for 99 years in violation of the law, the association leaders told the conference.

They said around 8 lakh of some 90 lakh grassroots fishermen of the country have become jobless.

In the crucial juncture of time, the association is organising its 4th national conference in the city on February 16 to realise their seven-point demands.

The other demands of the association are: setting up of a fisheries bank under the manage-

ment of the ministry and disbursing interest-free loan to the bona fide fishermen, inclusion of representatives from the association related with fishery resources development programmes.

The demand also included rehabilitation of disaster-hit fishermen, launching of a welfare fund and setting up of matsha palli (village for fishermen), banning use of fishing nets below five centimetres mesh and inclusion of the association's representative into National Shrimp Farmer Association.

Abdus Samad Azad, Vice President, Motaieb Hossain, Joint Secretary of the association, and Md Shahjahan Kabir Zahir, Convener of the association's 4th national conference, also spoke on the occasion.



PHOTO: SONY ERICSSON

A joint reception was accorded by Ericsson Bangladesh and Sony Ericsson Bangladesh to the management of GrameenPhone Ltd at a city hotel recently on the GP's achievement of 500,000-subscriber mark. Picture shows top officials of the three companies at the function.

Violence dashes CHT tourism hopes

AFP, Chittagong

Bangladesh's hopes of making its scenic southeastern hill tracts a tourist destination are evaporating as factions supporting and opposing a 1997 treaty that ended a tribal insurgency have begun fighting again.

One year after three Westerners were kidnapped in the dense jungle tracts, the number of foreign visitors has continued to nosedive due to the renewed clashes.

Only several hundreds foreigners visited the Chittagong Hill Tracts in 2001, down from an average of 5,000 in the years following the peace pact, officials said.

The treaty, signed by then prime minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed's government and tribal rebels, handed over some local control in a bid to end two decades of insurgency that left thousands dead.

But unrest has been growing again in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, a swathe of jungle bordering both India and Myanmar where two Danes and a Briton were abducted last year.

The Westerners were freed unharmed last year after a commando raid following days of negotiations over ransom demands.

The trio was kidnapped by suspected militants from the Chakma tribal group that opposed the 1997 treaty.

Bangladesh has a 1.42 million-strong tribal population divided into 77 main and small tribes. Chakmas, constituting nearly a quarter of the tribal population, are the most dominant and economically advanced.

Security has since been stepped up in the area, where locals caution against visits to remote areas or after sunset.

Recent clashes have pitted tribal factions that support and oppose the peace treaty against each other and tension has been on the upswing between tribal elements and Bengali-speaking settlers.

In the past three months 12 people were killed and 30 abducted, a police officer said.

Abul Hasnat Patwari, a senior official of the state-run tourism body, the Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation, said the region saw good business after the peace treaty, with foreigners keen to visit.

In the past year that has changed drastically, with visitors afraid to step foot in the jungle.

"Our hotel business has marked a fall by about 50 per cent due to a fall of foreign guests, especially after the abduction last year of three foreigners," Patwari said.

The downturn in tourism has also hit the port city of Chittagong, where Giasuddin Ahmed said his car rental

business has been affected by the "sense of fear" caused by the unrest.

Officials in the hill tracts say they are ready to provide protection to visitors.

"We are ready to provide security to the foreign visitors if they give us prior information as per government order," said Jafar Ahmed Khan, the deputy administrative chief of the Rangamati district.

But he acknowledged it will take some time to shore up visitor confidence.

Bangladesh, a rare stop for international visitors, last month started efforts to lure tourists to the impoverished country's forests and beaches.

No statistics are kept on the number of tourists in Bangladesh, but in 1997 -- the last year for which statistics are available -- 182,420 foreign nationals stopped in the country of 129 million.



PHOTO: BANK ASIA

Picture shows (from right to left) Shafiuddin Chowdhury, Director, A Rouf Chowdhury, Vice Chairman, M Syeduzzaman, Chairman, Syed Anisul Haq, Managing Director, Rumee A Hossain, Director, and Romo Rouf Chowdhury attending the Annual Conference-2002 of Bank Asia Limited held in the city on Friday.

Weavers to go for agitation unless demands met

UNB, Dhaka

Bangladesh Sangjukta Tanti Samity (BSTS), an association of the country's weavers, yesterday came up with a 17-point demand and threatened to wage an agitation programme if the government fails to meet its demands by March 30.

The weavers put forward demands at a press conference at the National Press Club.

Their 17-point demand included announcing a consistent handloom, spin and textile policy, reducing the prices of yarn and chemicals, providing soft loan to the weavers by setting up a handloom bank, reviving the handloom industry, and curbing smuggling of yarn.

In an attempt to prob up the country's sinking waving industry, the government once provided the weavers with loans under the Weavers Credit Scheme (WCS) but this loan spelt disaster on the weavers due to some wrong policies

initiated by the government.

The plight of over 10 lakh weavers of the country worsened when the government started to encourage import of textile accessories providing various incentives, including tax rebate.

Reading out a written statement at the conference, BSTS general Secretary Shamsul Alam Zulfikar said WCS, launched in 1982, provided loans to the weavers for boosting their business. "But the government programme could bring any good for the weavers."

He alleged that an amount of Tk 98 crore, out of Tk 160 crore allocated under the WCS, distributed among the weavers. "And it was not so easy for the weavers to avail of the loan because of corruption by a section of officials of the concerned banks, Textile Department and Handloom Board," he said.

Zulfikar said the government could not implement the WCS programme hundred percent,

although the weavers took loans from Tk 3,500 to tk 9,000 in different categories under the programme.

He said the banks were now filing cases against weavers although they have so far realised tk 316 crore from the weavers.

"Cases have been filed against more than 1200 weavers, forcing them to shut down their handloom factories. They are also being harassed in many cases," he told newsmen.

The last date for paying interests of the loans and service charges was December 31, 2001 but many poor weavers failed to pay their dues by the deadline compelling them to go into hiding, Zulfikar said demanding that the government withdraw all the cases filed against the weavers.

BSTS leaders Ahsanul Karim Chowdhury, M Musa Miah, Delwar Hossain, Shamsuzzaman Bhuiyana nd Rashida Begum were, among others, present at the news conference.



PHOTO: AL BARAKA BANK

Masum A Chowdhury, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Al Baraka Bank Bangladesh Ltd, speaks at the Dhaka area branch managers' conference of the bank held in the city recently.

S'pore lifts growth forecast

AFP, Singapore

Singapore could expect economic growth of between 1.0 and 3.0 per cent this year, in light of signs of a recovery in the United States, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said Monday.

The government's previous target was between minus 2.0 per cent and plus 2.0 per cent after Singapore's gross domestic product (GDP) contracted 2.2 per cent in 2001 from growth of 9.9 per cent in 2000.

"I hope the Year of the Horse will be more propitious. The US economy is showing signs of recovery," Goh said in a Lunar New Year message in the majority ethnic Chinese city state.

"In the US, some economic indicators are picking up, but others

are not. Moreover, the EU economies remain sluggish and Japan continues to be weighed down by structural problems," he said.

"Consumers are more optimistic. The financial markets have priced in this brighter outlook and rallied."

However, Goh cautioned against being "excessively sanguine about prospects of an early economic recovery for Singapore."

While some sectors in the US economy are showing indications of a recovery, other sectors are not. Japan remains weighed down by structural problems and the European Union economies remain sluggish.

"Sustained economic recovery might still be some way off," Goh said.

Paul Schymyck, an economist with research house IDEAGlobal

said, the market had expected such an upgrade, but said he was maintaining a forecast of a 1.5 per cent growth in GDP this year.

Pointing out that manufacturing output had shrank 22.1 per cent in December, the worst on record, he told AFP: "The economy is not going to gallop away this year."

With the upgrade, the government is saying the economy will recover this year, after falling last year into its worst recession in more than 30 years.

Top economists from the Nanyang Technological University are predicting a 4.0-per cent GDP expansion this year, but project unemployment to worsen until the year-end.

BRAC Bank introduces new product

BRAC Bank has introduced its deposit product "Maximizer, a special savings account."

The Managing Director of the Bank, Aziz Ahmed, launched the product by handing over a plaque to Ferdous Wahed, one of the premium customers of the bank at a simple ceremony in the city recently, says a press release.

Also present at the function was Mashrur Arefin, Vice-President & Head of Retail Division of the bank.

The main features of the product are: it gives interest on a daily balance, interest rate is notably high, there are absolutely no hidden charges or interest forfeitures, no ledger fees, no minimum balance fees, no withdrawal restrictions etc.

Moreover, the Maximizer account holders receive preferential treatment when they apply for personal loans. This is the first of a series of deposit as well as loan products to be introduced by BRAC Bank in the year 2002.

AIB names US regulator to head rogue trader probe

AFP, Dublin

The Irish bank at the centre of a rogue trading scandal named Sunday a top US banking regulator to head a month-long probe to unravel the tangle of deals that ran up losses of 750 million dollars (866 million euros).

Allied Irish Banks (AIB) insisted that US currency dealer John Rusnak "diligently, deliberately and deviously" defrauded the bank with a series of fictitious deals that spiralled out of control at its US subsidiary Allfirst.

The scandal, redolent of the Nick Leeson rogue trader fraud that brought down Barings Bank in 1995, has severely dented Allied Irish Banks' reputation and balance sheet, and executives hope that an external probe will clear up exactly what happened.

Eugene A Ludwig, former Comptroller of the US Currency from 1993-98 and former vice-chairman of Bankers Trust Company, will lead the month-long investigation into the scandal, AIB said.



PHOTO: BRAC BANK

At the recent launching ceremony of BRAC Bank's deposit product "Maximizer", Managing Director of the bank Aziz Ahmed (3rd from right), hands over the Maximizer plaque to a premium customer, Ferdous Wahed. Also seen in the picture are Mashrur Arefin (3rd from left), VP & Head of Retails Division, and other officials of the bank.

Former Enron chief to refuse to testify today

REUTERS, Washington

Former Enron Corp ENRNQ. PK Chairman and Chief Executive Kenneth Lay will refuse to testify on Tuesday when he appears under subpoena before a Congressional committee probing the collapse of the energy trading giant, his spokeswoman said Sunday.

"Under the instruction of counsel, Lay will exercise his Fifth Amendment right at the Tuesday hearing," Kelly Kimberly said, declining further comment. The amendment extends constitutional protection against self-incrimination.

Lay was subpoenaed to appear before a US Senate committee after he backed out of a voluntary appearance last Monday. Lay declined to testify after his lawyer complained about "prosecutorial" comments by lawmakers on television talk shows a day earlier.

The statement from Kimberly confirmed a prediction earlier on Sunday from Sen. Fritz Hollings of South Carolina, Democrat chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee that was scheduled to hear from Lay.

"Lay has got a good lawyer,"

Hollings told CBS television's "Face the Nation" programme. "I can't see, with things having gotten worse all week long, him testifying now."

Also appearing on the CBS programme were two Republicans leading the investigation in the US House of Representatives, who questioned whether former Enron Corp. Chief Executive Officer Jeffrey Skilling had been truthful while testifying last Thursday and said he could be prosecuted for perjury if not.

Skilling took no blame for the bankrupt energy trader's collapse and said he had no reason to believe it was in financial trouble when he left last August.

The chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, Rep Billy Tauzin of Louisiana, said he did not believe Skilling's claims and said the former CEO "may have put himself in some legal jeopardy as a result."

"You can't come to Congress, take the oath to tell the truth, and then not tell the truth," Tauzin said.

"We're hearing from others in the corporation that he came to us and told us a lot of untruths. If he did that, if that is true," he could face perjury charges, the congressman said.

"That could happen."

"All of us wanted to know the truth, and I don't think we got it."

Greenwood, chairman of the House Energy subcommittee on oversight and investigation that heard from Skilling, was also skeptical despite the fact that Skilling testified voluntarily before the panel probing off-the-books partnerships and questionable accounting at Enron.

"It was the dog ate my homework," Greenwood said. "Unfortunately, I don't thin he was forthcoming with us at all."

On Dec 2, Enron filed for bankruptcy, wiping out thousands of jobs and billions of dollars in equity held by employees and other investors.

The collapse of the Houston-based company that was once the seventh largest in America, is under investigation by the Justice Department, the Securities and Exchange Commission and nine congressional panels.

Four other top Enron executives have refused to testify before lawmakers, citing their constitutional protection against self-incrimination.