

SUPCL launches Surja LP Gas, Magic Burner

The Mongla plant of Summit United Petroleum Company Limited (SUPCL) started marketing "Surja LP Gas and Magic Burner" from May 2, says a press release.

The LP Gas plant built with the machinery of Siraga SA, the world renowned LP Gas plant building company of France.

SUPCL's Mongla Gas plant has an annual production capacity of 30,000 MT. M/S Petronas, the petroleum company of Malaysia is supplying LP gas at the plant's own jetty.

It is expected that Surja LP gas, since it is offering clean, affordable, environment friendly fuel, will be able to meet the demand in the energy-starved northern and south-western regions of the country.

Surja LP gas can be used for domestic cooking, welding purposes and even by octane run motor vehicles.

United Leasing declares 40pc dividend

United Leasing Company Ltd has declared a 40 per cent dividend for the year ending December 31, 2001, says a press release.

The declaration was made at the company's 13th annual general meeting held at a local hotel on Monday.

The meeting was attended by the shareholders including the directors representing the major foreign shareholders, ADB and Lawrie Group plc.

The company earned an after-tax profit of Tk 11.53 crore in 2001 as against Tk 9.53 crore in 2000.

Its income from operation grew by 17 per cent from Tk 101.42 crore in 2000 to Tk 118.60 crore in 2001. Total portfolio of the company amounted to Tk 247 crore at the end of 2001.

New senior director of Amex

M Shah Alam Sarwar has joined American Express Bank Ltd as Senior Director and Chief Operations Officer of Bangladesh, says a press release.

Prior to joining American Express, Sarwar was the head of group special assets management for Standard Chartered Bank and the country credit executive for the erstwhile ANZ Grindlays Bank.

In addition, he held various positions in multinational banks over the last twenty years, both in Bangladesh and abroad.

Sarwar holds a Master of Social Science degree in Economics from Dhaka University.

Microcell, IT-COM sign agreement

Microcell Multimedia, a reputed multimedia training institute, and the country's first digital magazine IT-COM signed an agreement at Microcell Multimedia in the city on Sunday, says a press release.

Under the agreement, students of Microcell Multimedia will get internship facilities from IT-COM.

Abdullah-Al-Amin, executive editor of IT-COM, and Sheikh Muhammad Sajjad, project manager of Microcell Multimedia, signed the agreement on behalf of their respective sides.

The programme was presided over by Belal Ahmed, Managing Editor of IT-COM.

Opsonin training on presentation skills held

Opsonin Chemical Industries Ltd organised a three-day training programme on "Effective Presentation Skills at a local hotel for their managers and executives recently, says a press release.

The objective of the course was to make the participants learn how to prepare quality presentation materials and present the same to a group of people as well as individuals.

Executive Director Abdur Rakib Khan inaugurated the programme. At the closing ceremony, certificates were distributed among the participants by the Managing Director of the company.

BIBM course ends

BSS, Dhaka

A 12-day credit management course ended at Bangladesh Institute of Bank Management (BIBM) on Monday.

Director General of the Institute Dr Mohammad Sohrabuddin presided over the concluding session of the course and distributed certificates among the participants.

9-month export earnings miss target by 17 pc

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Belying hopes of improvement, the country's external sector continued with disappointing performance.

Export earnings trailed by around US\$ 928.77 million or 17.27 per cent from the \$5377.50 million target in the first nine months of the current financial year. The earnings are also \$332.61 million less than that of last fiscal's same period, posting a 6.96 per cent negative growth.

The earnings were \$1605.98 million in the first quarter (July-Sept), 1389.14 million in the second quarter (Oct-Dec) and \$1453.86 million in the third quarter (Jan-Mar).

"Considering the performances during December and January, we thought that we would be doing better in the next months as export earnings were \$535 million and \$539 million for the two months respectively. But the performances in

February and March really frustrating and crisis still persists," said an official of Export Promotion Bureau (EPB).

The earnings were \$496.80 million in February and \$418.20 million in March while the average monthly target is \$ 597.50 million, he mentioned.

Both export volume and price index went down by 5.27 per cent and 1.69 per cent during July-March period of FY02.

All major sectors including readymade garment, knitwear, frozen foods, leather, chemical products, raw jute, tea, petroleum byproducts, electronics, engineering products and handicrafts showed negative growth to as high as 69.66 per cent and trailed by as high as 89.20 per cent from the target during the period.

RMG exports fetched \$2371.15 million, down by 14.55 per cent from

\$2511.65 million target and also 5.60 per cent lower than that of last fiscal's same time.

Knitwear worth \$1051.67 million was exported till March, falling 17.52 per cent short of this fiscal's goal, and 2.64 per cent less than that of last fiscal's same period.

In the first nine months of FY02, frozen foods worth \$201.80 million were exported, missing \$292.50 million target by 31 per cent and showing a massive 28.82 cent fall from that of last fiscal's corresponding period.

Leather export fetched \$152.17 million, which is 29.55 per cent less than the current fiscal's \$216 million target and posting a 13.52 per cent negative growth over the last fiscal's corresponding period.

Jute goods worth \$180.25 million were exported against \$206.25 million target. The earnings are 12.60 per cent less than the target

but increase of 7.79 per cent over the last fiscal's corresponding period.

Raw jute worth \$46.81 million was exported against the target of \$52.50 million, which is down by 10.84 per cent from the goal and shows a 6.14 per cent decline from the last fiscal's same time.

Tea export amounted to \$15.86 million during July-March period of FY02 against the \$22.50 million earnings target, showing a 29.51 per cent shortfall.

Handicrafts worth only \$4.23 million were exported during the period against the \$6 million target. This shows a 19.58 per cent decline over the last fiscal's earnings and 29.50 per cent short of the target.

During the July-March period, chemical products worth \$42.61 million were exported against the \$82.50 million target.

2 deals signed to boost pvt sector telecommunications

CIDA to finance study

UNB, Dhaka

Two separate agreements were signed here yesterday for conducting studies to find out ways and means to help the private sector play a bigger role in the country's telecommunication sector.

Infrastructure Investment Facilitation Centre (IIFC), a government-owned entity of Economic Relations Division (ERD), will conduct the studies under the deals with Bangladesh Telecom Regulatory Commission (BTRC).

BTRC chairman Syed Margub Morshed and IIFC executive director Nazrul Islam signed the agreements on behalf of the respective sides at the commission office.

Funded by Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the study will be on franchising Public Switching Telephone Network (PSTN) services and on outsourcing spectrum management, said Morshed after signing the contracts.

Under the study, IIFC would estimate potential market demand for telecom services, evaluate how market evaluation scenarios may or may not meet this demand and suggest a strategic master plan for the telecom sector for ensuring the highest level of benefit for the people.

In another study, it would suggest ways of securing private sector involvement in spectrum manage-

ment and offer a decision tool for determining the appropriate revenue sharing level that would attract private investment for a specific level of service to be provided.

It is estimated that the commission will earn a revenue of Tk 170 crore per year in the present status, Morshed said.

Radio spectrum is the sum of frequencies available for telecommunications, radio and TV broadcasting, space communication, remote sensing and passage of radio waves that allow various types of distance communications.

Major spectrum users include all telecommunication service providers like cellular base stations, cellular handsets and non-cellular radio stations.

Credit Agricole launches OPTIM II

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Credit Agricole Indosuez introduced OPTIM II, a cash management solution, in the bank here yesterday.

Thomas Carton, the bank's regional representative for electronic banking products, made a presentation on the solution at Sonargaon Hotel in the city.

Gerard Marchand, country manager of Credit Agricole, and finance directors and controllers of different multinational companies and large local corporates attended the launching function.

The users of the OPTIM II will be able to view and conduct all kinds of transactions sitting in their desks. Besides, they can access indicative foreign exchange rates, market commentary and encrypted email facility through OPTIM, Carton said.

He said the main six upgraded modules of OPTIM are cash reporting, cash initiation, trade reporting, trade initiation, workstation management and communication.

OPTIM is currently available in 12 Asian countries of which eight are using it actively, he mentioned. "Emails with large attachments can be sent to Credit Agricole in a secured environment with authorized Digipass Signature."

OPTIM, which was first launched in Asia in 1995, has been progressively developed in tandem with clients' needs. It won the confidence of many clients with its superior technology, high security features and flexible structure.

Latin America vows to fight US farm bill

AFP, Montevideo

Latin American governments have roundly condemned the subsidy-heavy US farm bill, saying it will hurt their vital export sectors and vowing to fight it tooth and nail at the World Trade Organization.

US President George W. Bush signed the legislation Monday, providing 181.5 billion dollars in farm subsidies over 10 years, an increase of some 82.8 billion dollars from current levels.

US trade partners throughout Latin America quickly raised their voices in anger at additional protectionist measures in the wake of the US tariff increase on steel imports announced in March.

"Let's hope (the 2001 WTO round of talks in) Doha marked the beginning of a process that will ensure free trade in both directions... reversing the current state of affairs, in which the incompetence of some, especially in the farming sector, continues to prevail over the interests of the many," said Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso.



PHOTO: SIBL

Commerce Minister Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury opens the 19th branch of Social Investment Bank Limited (SIBL) at Dhanmondi in the city yesterday.

Khosru urges banks to boost investment in SMEs

SIBL opens branch at Dhanmondi

BSS, Dhaka

Commerce Minister Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury yesterday said banks should identify the prospective fields for investment in the greater interest of the overall socio-economic development of the country.

"Small and medium industries have much prospects but most of the time the entrepreneurs do not get required cooperation from the banks," he said, adding, "Most of the banks remain more busy with big industrial units."

The commerce minister was

inaugurating the 19th branch of Social Investment Bank Limited (SIBL) at Dhanmondi in the city yesterday.

Among others, Manirul Huq Chowdhury, MP, and SIB's Managing Director Golam Mostafa also spoke on the occasion with the bank's Vice-Chairman Kamaluddin Ahmed presiding.

Khosru referred to the modern banking system with day-to-day changes and said banks should no more run in the traditional way. "Though profit is the main target, banks should also play their due role in the socio-economic development

of the country," he said.

The commerce minister asked the banks to invest more and more in the small and medium industries on the basis of a good bank-client relations.

"If banks invest in the fields like light engineering, flower production and agriculture processing, the country may earn a lot of foreign currency from these sectors," he said.

Khosru urged the banking authorities to adopt the latest technology and also enhance their service to the greater benefit of the clients as well as the banking sector itself.

Japan economy stops sliding: Minister

AFP, Tokyo

The Japanese economy has reached the end of a long slump thanks to a revival in exports and pick-up in price levels, while private consumption also appeared to be stable, key ministers said Tuesday.

"I believe the economy seems to have bottomed out, given the fact that the decline in CPI (the consumer price index) has moderated recently, while WPI (the wholesale price index) is beginning to show a rebound in some areas," Finance Minister Masajuro Shiokawa told a

regular news conference.

Consumer prices -- a leading indicator of inflation or deflation -- in March fell 1.2 percent from the previous year, marking the 31st straight month of decline.

But they rose 0.2 percent from February, triggering hope that a protracted period of deflation -- which hurts corporate profits and raises the value of debt in real terms -- was ending.

"Exports remain steady, keeping the momentum that started in the autumn," said Shiokawa. "The deterioration in the jobless rate is

also slowing."

Japan's unemployment rate in March fell to 5.2 percent -- its lowest level since last August -- from 5.3 percent in February, despite market expectations of an increase, while a slump in exports continued to ease thanks to a pick-up in demand from major markets such as the United States.

Domestic demand remained stable despite relatively high unemployment levels and weak wages, said State Minister for Economic and Fiscal Policy Heizo Takenaka. "Generally, consumption does

not fall sharply, even if there are bad economic conditions and neither will it rise sharply in good conditions," he told a separate briefing.

"It seems domestic consumers tend to be very calm," Takenaka said, declining to comment directly on whether the Cabinet Office would upgrade a top economic report for the third month in a row.

The government may launch tax incentives to stimulate the economy and industry in the current year to March 2003, despite facing opposition, said Shiokawa.

Law drafted to facilitate e-biz

UNB, Dhaka

Bangladesh is going to have a law to facilitate electronic commerce eliminating the need for paper documents for business deals.

Bangladesh Law Commission drafted the law as the growth of electronic commerce was being retarded for want of a legal framework that recognises digital signatures and other electronic documents.

The draft on Information Technology (Electronic Transaction) Act, prepared in February this year, was circulated among the stakeholders and relevant forums to elicit opinions before it takes the final shape.

The proposed act will have enough provisions to check cyber crimes which are not covered by any existing law of the land.

It aims to eliminate barriers to E-Commerce, promote legal and business infrastructures to implement secure E-transactions, curtail the need for paper documents and signatures, facilitating electronic filing in government agencies and ensuring efficient delivery of elec-

tronic records from government offices.

IT professionals made their preliminary observations on the draft as its highlights were presented at a roundtable at Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) yesterday.

FBCCI president Yusuf Abdullah Harun lauded the Commission's initiative, while leaders of IT bodies SM Kamal, Habibullah N Karim and SM Iqbal, and lawyers Barrister Tanjibul Alam and Moinul Islam Chowdhury also spoke.

FBCCI director for IT affairs Akhtaruzzaman Manju said the Federation's Standing Committee on IT will hold more seminar and discussions to shape up a private sector view on the draft within next two or three weeks. Their recommendations would be conveyed to the Law Commission, he added.

Computer-based information communication and digital technology have made the global trade transactions easier, cheaper and quicker, but Bangladesh's business community is still reluctant to go for electronic trade as existing laws

only accept paper records and documents, signatures, cheques and other manuals.

So, transactions in electronic form are often not recognised in Bangladesh's courts, thereby retarding the growth of E-Commerce here, the Commission viewed.

As global trade is increasingly being dependent on electronic forms, Bangladesh urgently needs a proper law to facilitate electronic commerce and eliminate barriers to it, the Commission felt.

The draft has been based on the Model Law on E-Commerce framed in 1996 by the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL).

Singapore enacted Electronic Transactions Act, 1998 and India recently enacted the Information Technology Act, 2000.

In their acts, both Singapore and India excluded documents of negotiable instruments, powers of attorney, trusts, wills and contracts for the sale or conveyance of immovable property from the operation of law.



PHOTO: STAR

Thomas Carton, regional representative for electronic banking products of Credit Agricole Indosuez, speaks at the launching ceremony of OPTIM II, a cash management solution, at Sonargaon Hotel in the city yesterday. Gerard Marchand, Country Manager of the bank, is also seen in the picture.

Bangladesh to submit new list of items to US for GSP

UNB, Dhaka

Bangladesh will submit a list of some new products in 26 categories eligible under the United States GSP scheme to the US administration for enhancing exports to the American market.

Necessary information on the products as per specified requirement of the US administration must be enclosed with a review petition to be submitted for the additional GSP facilities, a commerce ministry official told UNB Monday.

The Ministry of Commerce is now preparing to collect the product information and asked Export Promotion Bureau (EPB) and apex trade body FBCCI to invite the information from the respective sectors urgently.

Meanwhile, the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI)

has issued over 100 letters to their members and different export houses to seek their cooperation in providing information, said an FBCCI official.

EPB assigned FBCCI to collect necessary information and submit it to the bureau for processing. In the invitation letter, EPB listed five categories of products: leather goods, jute and yarn-made carpets and similar products, jute sacks and bags of the kind used for the packing of jute, stainless steel tableware and fruit juice.

The ministry identified potential of 118 products of which, 63 have already been put on the eligibility list and 29 remained on the sensitive list that are out of the purview of the review petition.

"Even the US president cannot enlist the sensitive items in the eligibility list," said one official of the ministry.

Other potential items expected to be added to the eligibility list include shrimp, salted and dehydrated fish, tortoise and turtles, soybean oil, refined palm oil, sweet biscuits, waffles and wafers/snacks, rusks, toasted bread and similar toasted products, cast iron articles (cast iron, forging crest iron, sewerage manhole cover).

The US administration asks for providing the information for the most recent three calendar years of the beneficiary country.

The required identification includes the principal beneficiary country suppliers that are expected to benefit from the proposed modifications, name and location of firms, actual production figures and estimated increase if GSP eligibility is granted, actual production and capacity utilization and estimated increase in GSP eligibility.

US farm subsidy threatens world trade talks: Diplomats

AFP, Geneva

New global trade talks risk becoming sidetracked by a bitter row between the United States and its principal commercial partners who accuse it of failing to honor its commitments to free trade, diplomats warned Tuesday.

Brushing aside international criticism, President George W. Bush signed a bill Monday to beef up US farming subsidies with an additional 83 billion dollars.

Key US commercial partners in Europe, Asia and Latin America have strongly condemned the move as making a mockery of free trade just as a new round of global talks to tear down trade barriers is getting underway.

The round is being held under the auspices of the World Trade Organization and was launched at a WTO ministerial conference in the Qatari capital Doha last November.

Washington's many critics view the legislation as displaying "total scorn" by the United States toward

its global trade commitments, according to one Geneva-based diplomat who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"We will be asking in the coming weeks for the United States to recommit itself publicly to the stance it took with us in Doha in pursuing significant progress as far as agriculture is concerned," Australia's Trade Minister Mark Vaile said on Monday.

Australia, a leading member of the Cairns Group of 18 exporting countries opposed to subsidies, has always targeted the European Union for its export assistance and has traditionally sided with Washington.

But Vaile said Australia was concerned by the "the apparent deterioration in the international environment," referring to the US farm bill and a bitter conflict over US steel tariffs.

He told reporters that a number of developments had possibly "changed the atmospherics" regarding the focus of the new Doha

trade round.

Under the new round, the 144 WTO members have agreed an ambitious programme of negotiations scheduled to run until early 2005, including the wide liberalisation of agriculture and a reduction in domestic farming subsidies.

Experts say the US bill is contrary to one of the main aims on agriculture laid down at Doha -- the reduction of domestic support for agricultural exports.

Congressional budget estimates say the measure will provide 181.5 billion dollars in farm subsidies over 10 years, an increase of some 82.8 billion dollars from current levels.

A diplomatic source said the farm bill, and the US steel tariffs, show that the United States "is going it alone and is not worrying too much about international cooperation".

"What counts above all are short term domestic and electoral interests. The impression is of a government without vision that is navigating by sight," the source said.