

US holds out at WTO talks on medicines access

AFP, Geneva

The United States was still holding out on Monday at crunch WTO talks on the scope of diseases to be covered under a key WTO accord on ensuring poor countries access to life-saving cheap medicines, trade sources said.

At least 17 other World Trade Organisation members, including the European Union, told a nearly two-hour meeting here that although not completely acceptable, they could live with a newly tabled draft text, a source added.

"I can announce to you that the EU is ready to support this text," EU Trade Commissioner Pascal Lamy said in Brussels.

With a self-imposed deadline looming on Friday, the 144-nation WTO was presented with proposed fresh wording by the talks chairman, Eduardo Perez Motta, of Mexico, during the day in a bid to overcome deep divisions.

"Progress has been made," one Western diplomat said to waiting reporters, a comment echoed by a number of other delegates.

But US Ambassador Linnet Deilly told the meeting at the WTO's Geneva headquarters that Washington still had difficulty with some of the proposed wording, a source said.

And Kenya, on behalf of the African group, said it also had some concerns about the text now on the table, and would need to await instructions from their capitals ahead of another meeting scheduled on Tuesday.

Manila bans used vehicles

AFP, Manila

Philippines President Gloria Arroyo has banned imports of most types of used motor vehicles to protect the local automotive industry, the trade department said Tuesday.

Arroyo's order "strongly supports the growth and development of the local automotive manufacturing industry", Trade Secretary Manuel Roxas said.

A total ban will apply on imports of used cars, sports utility vehicles, passenger vans, pick-ups, and light trucks with a gross vehicle weight of less than 2.5 tonnes, the statement said.

Imports of used light trucks weighing between 2.5 and 6.0 tons would be restricted but no ban would be applied because many small businesses, which make up 99.5 per cent of all Philippine businesses, cannot afford new vehicles, Roxas said.

"On the average, brand new light trucks cost two and a half times that of imported used trucks," he said.

Local assemblers, mainly subsidiaries or affiliates of Japanese automakers, have complained that imports of used vehicles are ruining their business.

Roxas said there would be no restrictions on imports of used buses weighing more than 12 tonnes, while those weighing between six and 12 tonnes would be regulated.

ADB approves \$200m loan to India for fiscal reforms

AFP, Manila

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) said Tuesday that it has approved a 200 million-dollar loan to the Indian state of Kerala to support fiscal reforms.

The Netherlands is providing a 50 million-dollar grant as co-financing for the Kerala project, the Manila-based bank said in a statement.

Kerala, home to 32 million people, "has impressive social indicators and a high degree of participation, but financial problems and rising debts are threatening its provision of essential services to poor and marginalized communities," the bank said.

The assistance would help create an environment to achieve fiscal sustainability, it added.

"We welcome Kerala's commitment to reform and ADB and the state government intend this loan to be the beginning of a long-term partnership that involves work in sectors such as power and infrastructure," senior ADB official Yoshihiro Iwasaki said in the statement.

The 200 million-dollar loan, the bank's first to Kerala, matures in 15 years and was drawn from the bank's LIBOR-based lending facility.

Dhaka plans rail, road links to China thru' ASEAN states

Communications minister tells workshop

UNB, Dhaka

The government is taking initiative to build faster communications network up to China passing through ASEAN countries following recent breakthroughs in diplomatic and economic relations.

Communications Minister Barrister Nazmul Huda said this while speaking at a seminar on "Possibility of Development of Bangladesh Railway", jointly organised by the International

Transport Workers Federation and Bangladesh Railway Employees League in the city yesterday.

He told the meet that measures are being taken for bringing the country under speedier rail and road communications with the ASEAN countries and beyond through Dhaka-Chittagong-Myanmar-Thailand-Malaysia-Vietnam-Hong Kong-China route.

"With the development of inter-country communications of Bangladesh with the Southeast

Asian countries overall development and living standard of people in the region will substantially be enhanced through massive development of industrial, commercial and investment situation," Barrister Huda said.

He observed that the country achieved massive successes in different sectors in the first one year of alliance government following an overwhelming victory at the October general election.

But law-and-order situation

could not be improved at desired levels. To improve it to expected levels, he said, "the government took a bold decision of launching joint drive led by the army".

The minister said the step deserved an appreciation from the opposition, but they took it as a 'failure of the government'.

Among others, State Minister for Forest and Environment Zafrul Islam Chowdhury also spoke on the occasion.



PHOTO: DCCI

Commerce Minister Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury addresses a seminar on 'Export development of leather sector in Bangladesh' jointly organised by the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI), International Trade Centre (ITC), and Ministry of Commerce at Sonargaon Hotel yesterday. State Minister for Commerce Barkat Ullah Bulu, Commerce Secretary Suhel Ahmed Chowdhury, DCCI President Matiuur Rahman and ITC consultants MA Maleque, G Dadaglio and Michel Woodley are also seen in the picture.

'Make leather sector more export-oriented like RMG'

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Speakers at a seminar yesterday reiterated the need for capacity building in product design, quality management and international marketing to make the country's leather industry more export-oriented like readymade garments.

They were speaking at a seminar on Export Development in Leather Sector of Bangladesh jointly organised by Ministry of Commerce, the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI) and International Trade Centre (ITC), Geneva.

Commerce Minister Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury was present as chief guest at the seminar while State Minister for Commerce Barkatullah Bulu and Commerce Secretary Suhel Ahmed Chowdhury attended as special guests.

DCCI President Matiuur Rahman, National Consultant and Project Coordinator of ITC MA Maleque, Apex Group Chairman Syed Manzur Elahi

and Senior Market Development Officer of ITC were also present on the occasion.

Speaking on the occasion commerce minister put emphasis on finding out ways and means to help the country's leather sector achieve its optimum level.

He said the country has tremendous potentials in this sector but could not yet cross the threshold.

Khosru said product diversification and quality raw materials for producing leather goods are necessary to increase the export volume from this sector.

He said Black Bengal Goat Project of the government could help local entrepreneurs in this matter.

The minister also said there is no reason to lag behind in leather sector when the country is doing better than its neighbouring countries like India and Pakistan in apparel and ceramic sectors.

Apex Group Chairman Syed

Manzur Elahi said at present lack of quality and adequate raw materials is the main problem of this sector. He feared as the quantity of leather is going down every year all over the world, the country may face shortage of raw materials in future.

The seminar informed that Bangladesh leather export has declined to 206 million US dollars during 2001-2002 from 254 million US dollars in 2000-2001 mainly because of dearth in quality and quantity of raw materials.

The seminar also identified lack of technical knowledge in producing higher quality finished products from relatively lower grade of leather as major hurdle to the expansion of this sector.

However, the seminar said despite the weaknesses of the sector it has manifold strengths like low costs of labour and advantageous geographical position of the country.



PHOTO: ARENA MULTIMEDIA

A three-day exhibition on multimedia, animation and graphics work on the occasion of Victory Day was inaugurated at Arena Multimedia Gulshan Centre in the city yesterday. Web pages, digital graphics and animation works depicting the history of Liberation War are on display in the show inaugurated by Ferdousi Priyavashini. Brigadier (ret'd) Zakir Hossain, director of Arena Multimedia Gulshan Centre, SS Kamal, managing director of Anupam Infotech Ltd, Nazneen Kamal, centre head of Arena Multimedia, and Dr SA Iqbal, managing director of ECM Services Limited, were also present on the occasion.

Oil price hits 2-month high

AFP, New York

The benchmark US oil price rose above 30 dollars a barrel for the first time in two months here Monday amid fear of an Iraqi war and concern over a strike in Venezuela.

The price of a barrel of light sweet crude for January delivery shot up to 30.12 dollars in closing trade here from 28.44 dollars Friday.

Fear of an Iraqi conflict mounted after Secretary of State Colin Powell said there were problems with the declaration Iraq made to the United Nations about its weapons pro-

grams.

"We have said since the very beginning that we approach it with scepticism, and the information I have received so far is that this scepticism is well founded," Powell told reporters.

"There are problems with the declaration," he said.

The comment were enough to unnerve the market, said AG Edwards market analyst Bill O'Grady.

"Coming from Powell, it is a big deal," O'Grady said.

Meanwhile, much of Venezuela,

the world's fifth largest oil exporter, remained paralyzed by a general strike aimed at toppling President Hugo Chavez, who refuses to step down.

Police fired rubber bullets and tear gas at demonstrators blocking Caracas streets. Government troops took over the Paraguana refinery complex, the world's largest, according to the manager of the installations.

"The market has just figured out that the situation in Venezuela is a big deal," O'Grady said.

Sonali Exchange opens branch in New Jersey

BSS, New Jersey

Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman inaugurated the eighth branch of Sonali Exchange here on Monday reiterating his call to expatriate Bangladeshis to send their remittances to the country through proper channel.

The finance minister said more branches of Sonali Exchange will be set up in the US and other countries to help the expatriates send their money smoothly.

The minister said expatriate Bangladeshis have been making significant contribution to the

development of the country.

He said the expatriates should send more remittances to boost the country's foreign reserve and strengthen economy. The illegal channels of sending money have been closed virtually after the enactment of Money Laundering Law, he said.

The minister said the government has developed many infrastructure to facilitate the expatriates to send their money hurriedly and safely to the country. They could also be benefited if they make investment in different bonds, he said.

Kazi Asaduzzaman, chief executive officer of Sonali Exchange, a subsidiary company of the state-owned Sonali Bank, presided over the inaugural function held at English Community Centre at Patterson town.

Governor of Bangladesh Bank Dr Fakrudin Ahmed, Finance Secretary Zakir Ahmed Khan, Permanent Representative of Bangladesh to the UN Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury and Minister-Pres of Bangladesh Mission in UN M Mohaddes were, among others, addressed the function.

Thai economy grows 5.8pc in third quarter

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's economy grew a better than expected 5.8 per cent in the third quarter from a year earlier, powered by rising exports and firm domestic demand, official data showed Monday.

The strong growth prompted the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) to lift the full-year growth forecast to 4.9 per cent from 4.0-4.5 per cent.

"We are happy with the figure. It is within the range of 5.5 to 6.0 per cent that we expected," said Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. "I believe the figure for the fourth quarter will also be strong."



PHOTO: ROMASK

Rangs-Tosha opened its 60th showroom at Panthapath in the city recently. Altaf Hossain, general manager (Dealer and Telecom), inaugurated the showroom. National Manager Yunus Ali Khan, executives of the company, local businessmen and managers from different commercial banks were present on the occasion.

Ctg tea sale witnesses strong demand

UNB, Chittagong

The season's 33rd sale of tea held in the port city yesterday experienced a strong demand especially for the clean well made types both brokens and fannings.

Demand for clean well made types, in both brokens and fannings category, in this sale was strong with frequently dearer market. All others were also dearer.

The Afghan buyer was quite active with fairly good support from Pakistan and Blenders while the Loose Tea Trade lent a fair support. CIS also operated very strongly on the larger brokens.

Dusts met with a good market

and prices generally advanced further over last.

CTC Leaf: 1,688 c/s, 20,190 g/s, 2,266 ppw sacks and 2 p/sacks on offer met with a strong demand in mostly dearer levels.

Brokens: Clean well made good liquoring brokens were a dearer feature following competition whilst all others were firm to dearer in line with quality. Plain types were considerably higher while the large brokens were also a much dearer market.

Fannings: Clean grainy good liquoring fannings were firm to dearer whilst all others were fully firm. Plain types were again dearer.

CTC Dust: 223 c/s, 2,341 g/s, 105 ppws and 1 p/sacks on offer met with a fairly strong demand. Good liquoring RDs/PDs and DS were dearer upto Tk 2 following competition. All others including CDs were a slightly lower market easing by Tk 2 to Tk 3 and upto Tk 5 for CDs. Internal market lent strong support with selective enquiry from Pakistan for the best liquoring RDs and PDs, said a press release.

Singapore's key exports improve

AFP, Singapore

Singapore's key exports showed a marked improvement in November, bolstered by strong demand for both electronic and non-electronic products, the government said Tuesday.

But, although the performance was well above expectations and made a double-dip recession more remote, the city-state's economic recovery remained relatively weak, International Enterprise Singapore (IES) said.

Non-oil domestic exports (NODX), a crucial economic indicator, grew 19 per cent in November from a year ago to 9.5 billion Singapore dollars (5.4 billion US dollars), the trade promotion agency said in a statement.

Economists had projected an increase of seven to 12 per cent after the previous month's 5.7 per cent rise.

Malaysia to cut tariffs on Southeast Asian cars next year

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia said Monday it will cut tariffs on imported cars from Southeast Asian countries from next year but will offset the reductions with higher excise duties.

Industry leaders said they were disappointed because imported cars would not be any cheaper due to the offsetting duties.

Trade minister Rafidah Aziz said the details of the tariff reductions for imported vehicles were still being finalised.

Rafidah was quoted by Bernama news agency as saying that the automobile tariffs would eventually fall to 20 per cent by 2005. The current tariffs range between 42 per cent and 300 per cent.