

Thousands demonstrate ahead of G8 summit

AFP, Geneva

Up to 3,000 people demonstrated here on Friday in front of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the United Nations buildings here ahead of this weekend's G8 summit in the nearby French town of Evian.

Some protestors, shouting "Putin murderer, Free the Chechens" had thrown stones at the Russian mission close to the UN's European headquarters and broken windows.

Anti-riot police withdrew to avoid a confrontation.

The demonstrators included Britons, Swiss and Germans shouting anti-globalisation slogans directed at Sunday's start of a three-day summit of the leaders of the world's eight most industrialised countries in Evian.

They shouted "No Border, No Deportation" and "No to the Occupation of Iraq".

"We are here to defend asylum-

seekers. Why can money pass through borders but not asylum-seekers," said one British demonstrator, who declined to be named.

The Swiss ATS news agency said some demonstrators had broken a padlock and opened the gates of the WTO, which is closed until the middle of next week to avoid the demonstrations.

But dozens of police prevented the protestors getting inside the building, the agency said.



PHOTO: DCCI

DCCI Director Nazmul Huq (sitting 2nd-L) along with participants poses for a photograph at the end of a training on 'Export Documentation' organised by DCCI Business Inst in Dhaka recently. Commercial Secretary of Pakistan High Commission Wakar Ahmad Shah (sitting middle), who was a resource person of the course, was also present.

Japan jobless rate hovers near record high

REUTERS, Tokyo

Japan's unemployment rate was stuck at 5.4 per cent in April, within a whisker of a record high, as companies fighting for survival in a down trodden economy sought to stay lean.

The jobless rate, which was in line with economists' forecasts, was just below a record 5.5 per cent set in January, figures from the Ministry of Public Management, Home Affairs, Posts and Telecommunications showed today.

"At 5.4 per cent, the jobless rate is still at a high level. The job market remains in a tough condition and we need to keep a close eye on it," a ministry official told reporters.

The number of employed workers fell by 270,000 from a year earlier, the 25th straight month of decline.

Reflecting a cautious attitude among firms towards boosting their permanent workforce, full-time jobs shrank for the 21st month, while part-time positions increased for the 16th month.

Separate data from the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare showed the jobs-to-applicants ratio was unchanged from the previous month at 0.60, meaning there were 60 jobs available for every 100 job-seekers.

The grim figures come as concern mounts that last year's export-driven economic recovery might be faltering in the face of a global economic slowdown -- exacerbated by the SARS epidemic hitting Japan's Asian trade partners -- and a higher yen, which makes Japan's exports less competitive.

Moscow must stick to rules to join WTO

Bush says ahead of meeting Putin

AFP, Washington

Russia must make a commitment to stick to World Trade Organization rules if it wants to join the body, President George W. Bush said Thursday ahead of a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"It's in our national interest that Russia joins the WTO. And Russia will have to make some internal decision whether they are willing to conform to the guidelines of the WTO," Bush told reporters, before adding: "But I strongly support Russia's admission to the WTO."

The US president leaves Friday for visits to Poland, Russia, and a Group of Eight summit in France, before he flies to Egypt and Jordan for two summits on the Middle East conflict.

In Russia this weekend, Bush will attend commemorations for the 300th anniversary of the city of St Petersburg. The event is being hosted by the Russian leader.

Russia is negotiating with 64 members of the WTO on the conditions for its accession to the global trade body and hopes to wrap up bilateral talks by the end of the year. Talks have been going on for 10 years.

Deputy Trade and Economic Development Minister Maxim Medvedkovit said this week that agreement has been reached on 70

to 80 per cent of issues concerning access to the Russian market, but the problem of "customs duties on agricultural goods has not been resolved."

Talks on liberalising service sectors such as finance, telecommunications and transportation have proven to be the main sticking points.

Agora-Black & Decker raffle draw held

Raffle draw of Agora-Black & Decker sales campaign was held on Sunday in Dhaka, says a press release.

Customers who bought goods worth over Tk 700 from chain superstore Agora, a venture of Rahimafrooz Group, received raffle coupons for the sales promotion, which run from April 25 to May 23.

Prizes of the draw included Black & Decker vacuum cleaner, food processor and handmixers.

Among others, Yahya A Zahed Khondoker, chief executive officer of Black & Decker distributor Ultra Corporation, and TD Packir, head of operations of Agora, were present at the raffle draw.



PHOTO: KAI BANGLADESH ALUMINIUM

Sabbir Ahmed Aga, managing director of Kai Bangladesh Aluminium Limited, hands over the best dealer award of the company to Monwar Hossain of Alloy International at the annual sales conference of Kai Aluminium held in Dhaka on Thursday.



PHOTO: AGORA

Yahya A Zahed Khondoker, chief executive officer of Black & Decker distributor Ultra Corporation, picks up winning coupons at the Agora-Black & Decker raffle draw on Sunday in Dhaka. TD Packir, head of operations of Agora, was also present.

US growth revised upward

AFP, Washington

The US economy plodded ahead at a 1.9 per cent growth rate in the first quarter of 2003, the Commerce Department said Thursday, revising upward its preliminary 1.6 per cent growth estimate.

The tepid pace in the January-March period for gross domestic product (GDP) was only a marginal improvement from the 1.4 per cent rate of the fourth quarter of 2003.

"On the whole, these revisions did nothing to alter the general picture of the economy in the first quarter," said economist Dana Johnson at Bank One.

"It did not grow nearly fast enough to generate an increase in payrolls. Consumer spending is growing moderately, homebuilding is a source of strength, and capital spending is still weak."

Independent economist Joel Naroff said the first-quarter figures were affected by the run-up to the war in Iraq, but illustrate that this did not cause the economy to collapse as some had predicted.

"Even during the quarter that we expected households to be the most conservative, we still got some modest growth," Naroff said.

"We never got a double-dip

(recession), the economy held up ... This doesn't tell us where we're going from here, but we have a base from which to grow."

Consumers remained the key force in keeping the economy growing, with business investment faltering, the report showed. Consumer spending rose at a revised 2.0 per cent rate in the first quarter, up from the initial estimate of a 1.4 per cent gain.

"Consumers are keeping the ship afloat, waiting for businesses to get on board," said Sung Won Sohn, chief economist at Wells Fargo Bank.

In addition to a higher estimate of consumer spending, there was also an increase in the estimate of US exports, but a downward revision to equipment and software and an upward revision to imports.

The inflation picture remained relatively unchanged in the revised GDP data. The chain-weighted price index -- which adjusts for the quantities of inflated goods purchased -- showed a 2.5 per cent increase, unchanged from the prior estimate.

By one measure closely watched by economists, known as final sales -- GDP growth minus inventory adjustments -- the econ-

omy grew at a 2.4 per cent rate in the first quarter, up from the previous estimate of a 2.1 per cent gain.

"Our view is that moderate (GDP) growth of 1.9 per cent is below average and the economy is likely to return to the average of the last 20 years during the second half of the year," said John Silvia at Wachovia Securities.

"However, a period of sustained growth averaging that of the late 1990s is not likely and would not be a good investment bet."

The report also showed that after-tax corporate profits rose 2.5 per cent in the first quarter, down from a 4.1 per cent increase in the fourth quarter.

Naroff said the rise in profits is important for business confidence, which has been lacking so far in the tepid recovery.

"With earnings and cash flow improving, the capacity to invest is expanding," Naroff said. "That tells me the only thing businesses have to fear is fear itself."

A separate report by the Labor Department showed initial claims for regular unemployment benefits across the United States fell by 9,000 to a seasonally adjusted 424,000 for the week ended May 24.

STOCK