PRE-ENLARGEMENT TALKS

EU commissioners head to Moscow Thursday

AFP, *Brussels*

European Commission head Romano Prodi and seven other members of the EU executive will visit Moscow next Thursday in an effort to work through several policy disputes, notably concerning the bloc's enlargement and Russia's contested membership bid at the World Trade Organization.

While the top-brass visit is concerned loosely with the planning of an EU-Russia summit this spring, the commission said Friday a "whole series of questions" would be addressed, including the WTO candidacy and enlargement which have ratcheted up tensions between the two sides.

Russia has shown considerable nervousness at the EU's expansion on May 1 to take in 10 mostly former Soviet satellite states once beholden to Moscow, which would bring the future 25-member bloc up to its borders.

Negotiations between the current EU presidency, Ireland and Russia failed this week to modify their trade-based Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) to encompass the 10 future members -- a change which Moscow fears will result in a loss of preferential trade tariffs there.

"We have succeeded in covering 95 percent of the questions (concerning the PCA). We have found solutions, but we are pursuing discussions on two issues," Arancha Gonzalez, spokeswoman for Trade Commissioner Pascal Lamy, said on Friday.

The spokeswoman said discussions -- concerning the rights of ethnic Russians living in incoming EU states and the status of the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad -- had taken place in Brussels on Wednesday and were ongoing on Thursday. "They will continue next week", she said.

The European Union has also mounted resistance to Moscow's WTO bid, worrying that the domestic natural gas subsidies offered within Russia would unfairly help Russian companies produce cheap goods for sale on European markets.

In addition to Lamy, Prodi will be accompanied to Moscow by: External Relations Commissioner Chris Patten; Enlargement Commissioner Guenter Verheugen; Justice and Home Affairs Commissioner Antonio Vitorino; Transport Commissioner Loyola de Palacio; Environment Commissioner Margot Wallstroem; and Research Commissioner Philippe Busquin.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, after meeting his Irish counterpart Brian Cowen in Dublin on Wednesday, said he was confident both sides would reach agreement in the two weeks remaining before the EU enlargement.

The goal for the diplomats now is to strike a formal agreement which could be presented at a meeting of European foreign ministers in Luxembourg on April 27.

The meeting will be the last between the EU ministers before the bloc welcomes the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia, plus Cyprus and Malta into its ranks.

PHOTO: HSBC

Mamoon Mahmood Shah (3rd from left), manager, Personal Financial Services of the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation Limited (HSBC) in Bangladesh, and N A T Rouf (2nd from right), director (Sales & Services) of DHS Motors, sole distributor of Honda vehicles in Bangladesh, shake hands after signing a memorandum of understanding recently in Dhaka. Under the MoU, customers of DHS Motors will be eligible to get car loans of HSBC at a preferential rate of 13 percent interest.

Samsung Electronics profit hits record high

AFP, *Seoul*

South Korea's Samsung Electronics, the world's largest microchip maker, said Friday its first-quarter operating profit tripled to an all-time high of 3.5 billion dollars on brisk demand.

For the three months to March, the company posted an operating profit of 4.01 trillion won (3.5 billion dollars), up from 1.35 trillion won a year earlier.

Net profit surged 178.2 percent year-on-year to 3.14 trillion won in the first quarter as sales rose 50.2 percent to 14.4 trillion won, it said.

The electronics giant, also a maker of mobile phone handsets, flat screens and other electronics goods, forecast a solid second quarter.

Investor relations head Chu Woo-Sik attributed the gains to an "outstanding performance" in microchips, handsets and liquid crystal displays (LCDs).

Lankan central bank keeps rates unchanged

REUTERS, *Colombo*

The Central Bank of Sri Lanka left its key policy interest rates unchanged Friday, saying strong growth remained likely this year but political uncertainty could slow investment.

As expected by the market, the repurchase rate was left at seven percent and the reverse repo rate at 8.50 percent.

"Preliminary estimates indicate that growth in 2003 was higher than projected at the beginning of 2003," the bank said in a statement after a monthly monetary policy meeting.

"However, the uncertainty in the domestic market during the first few months (of 2004) appears to have made investors adopt a cautious approach."

The central bank cut the key repurchase rate by 2.75 percentage points last year to stimulate the economy, which has been bolstered by a two-year ceasefire in the decades-long war with Tamil Tiger rebels, but rates have been left unchanged for the past six months.

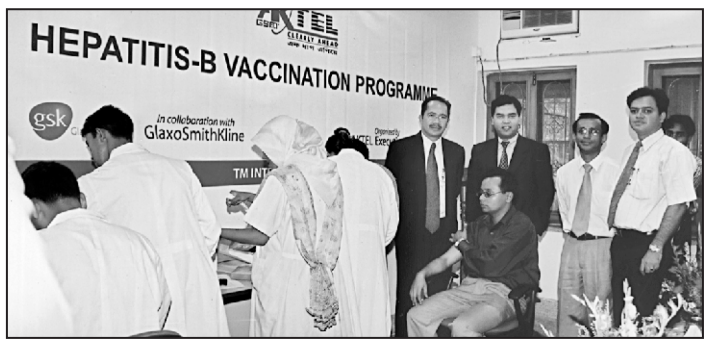

PHOTO: TM INTERNATIONAL BANGLADESH

Md Nasir Bin Baharom, managing director of TM International Bangladesh Limited, opens Hepatitis-B vaccination programme for Aktel staff and employees organised by Aktel Executive Club in cooperation with GlaxoSmithKline in Dhaka on Thursday. Azizul Huq, managing director of GlaxoSmithKline, and Shahriar Farid, president of Aktel Executive Club, were also present.

PHOTO: UNITED INS CO

M Moyeedul Islam (centre), chairman of United Insurance Company Limited, speaks at the branch managers' conference of the company in Dhaka recently. Syed Aziz Ahmad (left), managing director of the company, and M Harunur Rashid (right), director, are also seen in the picture.

S'pore exports surge 17pc in March

ANN/*The Straits Times*

The value of Singapore's exports surged 17 percent last month compared to a year ago. The rise, slightly above market expectations, prompted analysts to forecast a strong set of figures in the second quarter.

Unveiling the trade report card for last month, International Enterprise (IE) Singapore said yesterday that the Republic moved non-oil domestic exports (NODX) worth $11.2 billion, thanks to larger shipments of electronics and pharmaceuticals.

Impressive as the rise was, it was still slower than the 25.7 percent surge posted in February.

But analysts were quick to point out that the February figure was boosted by an increase in the number of working days in the month this year compared to last year. This was because the Chinese New Year holidays fell in January this year.

Last months' growth puts the cumulative rise for the first three months of the year to an encouraging 14.5 percent.

Analysts said that this underscored a strong underlying growth, which would boost economic growth this year.

"Overall, the numbers are quite good," said Joseph Tan, an economist at Standard Chartered Bank.

Electronics exports, which grew 8.7 percent last month making it the second straight month of growth, "continue to suggest that the export-led recovery remains fairly robust", he added.

CURRENCY

Following is Saturday's (April 17, 2004) forex trading statement by **Standard Chartered Bank**

Sell			Buy		
TT/OD	BC	Currency	TT Clean	OD Sight Doc	OD Transfer
59.3000	59.3500	USD	58.4050	58.2334	58.1637
72.1207	72.1815	EUR	69.1632	68.9601	68.8775
107.5287	107.6194	GBP	104.1536	103.8477	103.7234
44.9198	44.9576	AUD	42.7233	42.5978	42.5468
0.5558	0.5563	JPY	0.5364	0.5348	0.5342
46.1658	46.2047	CHF	44.7034	44.5721	44.5788
7.7221	7.7286	SEK	7.2067	7.1855	7.1769
44.4095	44.4469	CAD	43.0303	42.9039	42.8525
7.6133	7.6197	HKD	7.4799	7.4579	7.4490
35.5473	35.5773	SGD	34.6371	34.5353	34.4940
16.2769	16.2906	AED	15.7732	15.7269	15.7080
15.9391	15.9526	SAR	15.4511	15.4057	15.3872
9.9535	9.9619	DKK	9.0456	9.0191	9.0083
201.9067	202.0769	KWD	190.4304	189.8710	189.6438

Exchange rates of some currencies against US dollar

Indian rupee	Pak rupee	Lankan rupee	Thai bath	Nor kroner	NZ dollar	Malaysian ringit
43.77	57.43	97.9	39.405	6.8959	0.6893	3.80

Local Interbank FX Trading

Local interbank market was active on Saturday. US dollar eased against Bangladeshi taka in the thin interbank market.

Local Money Market

Money market was active. Call money rate was almost unchanged and ranged between 4.00 4.75 percent compared with 4.00-4.50 percent previously.

International Market

International market was closed on Saturday. The dollar weakened on Friday as a fairly disappointing batch of US economic data encouraged traders to take profits on earlier gains. Analysts said market expectations of near-term monetary tightening, which had pushed the dollar to multi-month highs against the euro earlier this week after a raft of robust US economic data, were now ebbing. An interest rate hike would enhance the allure of US assets for global investors, helping lift the greenback. By late afternoon in New York, the euro was trading just below $1.20 well off Wednesday's $1.1863. It also weakened against Japanese yen, sterling and Swiss franc.

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ReadyCash Raffle Draw Winners

The latest ReadyCash Raffle draw was held at ReadyCash Bangladesh office at Dhanmondi in Dhaka on Saturday, says a press release.

Prizes	*Name of Winners*	*Card No*
China Junction Chinese Free Lunch for Two	Md.Tarikul Islam	5047980010029841
TOMBOY Chinese Free Lunch Package	Kh Golam Haider	5047980010029839
Meal in the Box free Lunch	Md. Shah Alam	5047980000052321
Sentosa Chinese free Lunch/Dinner Package	AFM Bahauddin Nasim	5047980000052388
Everyday Everything FEDS free Gift Box	Md . Amanullah Chow	5047980000052308
Pabna Cloth Store free Gift Box	Faruque Ahmed Robin	5047980000052370
Desh Karupannya free Gift Box	Mir Sharif Mahmood	5047980010029703
Aziz Furniture free Gift Box	Mohammad Hossain	5047980000052406
Kamal General Store free Gift Box	A.M. Safayet Hossain	5047980010029781
Swiss free Meal for Three	Didar Ur Rahman	5047980020003430

Winners can collect their prizes from the Executive, Promotion of ReadyCash within 30 days of this news circulation by producing their ReadyCash card transaction vouchers. **ReadyCash encourages its cardholders to read The Daily Star and the Daily Prothom Alo on every Sunday or call our Customer Service at: 8123850, 8130497, and 8125294-7.**

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