

National Bank approves 20pc stock dividend

National Bank Limited has approved a 20 percent stock dividend for its shareholders for the year 2003.

The approval was made at the bank's annual general meeting and extra-ordinary general meeting held in Dhaka on Sunday with Perven Haque Sikder, chairperson of the bank, in chair, says a press release.

The operating profit of the bank increased to Tk 945.09 million in 2003 showing 8.59 percent rise as operating profit was Tk 870.32 million in 2002.

Among others, directors of the bank and Managing Director (current charge) Mustaque Ahmed were present in the meeting.

ATDP signs MoU for poultry sector growth

Agro-based Industries and Technology Development Project (ATDP) signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Bangladesh Poultry Industries Coordination Committee (BPICC) to promote the growth of poultry sector.

ATDP Chief of Party Ron Gillespie and BPICC Convener Moshirul Rahman signed the MoU on behalf of their organisations recently, says a press release.

According to the deal, ATDP will identify training needs of BPICC, assist in organising training programmes, help develop marketing, distribution and sales linkages for poultry products, provide counseling on institutional affairs.

ATDP will also provide support to build up a secretariat for BPICC.

Unocal records 1m man-hours of accident free operation

Jalalabad Natural Gas Field of Unocal Bangladesh situated in Block 13 has achieved a record of uninterrupted one million man-hours accident free operation. This milestone represents all the Unocal employees and contractors at Jalalabad Gas Plant who worked for a consecutive 1270 days without any lost time accident.

During this period, over 146,884 million cubic feet (mmcf) of natural gas and 1,572,404 barrels of condensate were produced at Jalalabad which have been vital for the steady supply of energy in the country, says a press release.

During this time natural gas production varied on a daily basis from 80 mmcf to over 212 mmcf as needed by Petrobangla.

Earlier, Unocal Bangladesh celebrated 1000 days of no lost time accident at the Jalalabad Gas Plant on December 24, 2003.

IMF to close Zimbabwe office next month

AFP, Harare

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is due to close its offices in Zimbabwe at the end of October because it no longer has a resident representative, a local official told AFP Monday.

"The dates for the closure (of the office) will be the end of October, 2004," Rodney Matemachani, the officer in charge of the Harare office of the international lender said.

"It (the office) can't be open without a resident representative."

The IMF's last representative to Harare left a year ago at the end of his term and no replacement has been appointed, Matemachani said.

"After he left they didn't appoint anyone... there's not much happening between the IMF and Zimbabwe."

The closure of the office comes amid strained relations between the southern African country and the IMF over Zimbabwe's failure to pay back more than 200 million US dollars in debt.

Zimbabwe is currently in the grip of economic hardships marked by high unemployment, triple digit inflation and shortages of foreign currency.

A stiff economic turnaround programme implemented late last year has however succeeded in reducing annual inflation from a peak of more than 600 percent in January to 314 percent last month.

Parjatan corp a dumping ground of bureaucrats

State minister for tourism says

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism Mir Mohammad Nasiruddin yesterday blasted the Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation (BPC) saying it has become a dumping ground of bureaucrats.

He said bureaucrats get posted to the corporation just six months before going to leave prior to retirement (LPR) who fail to bring any dynamism in the sector.

The minister said such frustrating performance of the BPC continues despite declaration of the tourism as a thrust sector.

The minister made the observations while speaking at a Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI)

organised seminar on 'Development of Tourism Industry in Bangladesh' in Dhaka.

The minister said president of Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) had to visit Bangladesh Embassy in Bangkok three times to obtain a visa. "But policymakers from Dhaka had to intervene to arrange visa for PATA president," the minister said.

He said motels operated by the BPC were turned into boarding houses where no gentleman can spend a night happily.

Pointing to the high cost of services here, Nasiruddin said a tourist has to pay US\$165 to stay a night at a five-star hotel in Bangladesh while they spend between US\$60 and US\$70 a night for staying in

Malaysia. "Presently we are at the same place where we were 32 years ago."

Acknowledging harassment at the airport, the minister said his ministry alone can do little to solve the problem.

FBCCI President Abdul Awal Mintoo said Bangladesh is at the bottom of the list of SAARC countries in terms of tourism development. "Number of tourists coming to Bangladesh is far less than that of India, Sri Lanka, Nepal or Pakistan."

Abdul Mannan, former state minister for civil aviation and tourism and also chairman of PATA Bangladesh chapter, said there is lack of policy support from government.

Sadique Ahsan, president of

Bangladesh Hotel and Guest House Owners Association, said there is hardly any concession or incentive for the tourism sector in general.

Md Faridul Haque, president of Tour Operators' Association of Bangladesh, said air-conditioned tourist buses, cruise vessels and international standard residential hotels are needed in the main tourism spots in Bangladesh in order to improve the services for the foreign tourists and attract them.

Khurshed Ali Mollah, chairman of FBCCI standing committee on tourism and hotel said in order to increase investment in the tourism sector the government should take steps so that private sector can get loans easily at lower rates.

TURISM INDUSTRY IN BANGLA

ORGANIZED BY

BANGLADESH CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY

004, FBCCI Conference Centre, Dhaka



(From left) State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism Mir Mohammad Nasiruddin, Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) President Abdul Awal Mintoo and Pacific Asia Travel Association (BPC) Chairman Abdul Mannan MP pose for photographs at a seminar on 'Development of Tourism Industry in Bangladesh' organised by FBCCI at its conference centre in Dhaka yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

GP announces series of new services

PC to Internet via GP, telemedicine on cards

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

In celebration of hitting two million subscribers mark GrameenPhone (GP) yesterday announced a series of new services to enhance its present subscribers' base.

GP Sales and Marketing Director Mehboob Chowdhury while briefing newsmen in Dhaka disclosed that GP subscribers will be able to log on to the Internet by using their GP connections from a personal computer (PC) from next year.

He said all a subscriber will need to do is attach an interfacing device that will connect the cell phone and dial-up through the PC. The mobile phone will hook the PC with the information superhighway through an ISP (Internet service provider).

The company will also introduce telemedicine service from March next year, Mehboob added.

"The telecommunications sector is growing rapidly in Bangladesh and so is GrameenPhone. The company is continuously planning to introduce new services to help its subscribers in all possible ways," he said.

"We are also seeking for alternatives to the 21-day validity of pre-

paid cards," he said hinting at introducing more new facilities for pre-paid subscribers who are the mainstay of GP customers.

He said once GP starts providing dial-up Internet connection to all its subscribers, the number of Internet users will also increase.

Scarcity of land phone connection retards Internet access while broadband service charges continue to remain high, Mehboob said adding, "GP's dial-up connection will revolutionise country's IT sector in one hand while the telemedicine service will enable patients in rural areas to consult specialists."

A GP-affiliated hospital or clinic in a divisional headquarters will send the digital image of patient's medical report to a highly specialised health institute in Dhaka through GP transmission link. The specialised doctors at health institute in Dhaka will advise after vetting the digital image of that report," Mehboob explained.

He said the service will be available to everyone irrespective of the fact whether the person is a GP subscriber or not.

The telemedicine service will obviate the need of a patient in Sylhet to come to Dhaka. Initially the service

will be available in divisional headquarters. It will be expanded to all districts later, Mehboob said.

Without giving details, he said the company will bring in some new features for pre-paid subscribers within one and a half months.

Though My Time, Friends and Family products which offer calls at 50 percent discounted rate have seen an increase in talk time but affected revenue. The cell-mail service has also become very popular, the GP executive said.

Asked about company's plan to face the challenges of BTB's mobile phone that is likely to hit market by the year end with reduced call rate and zero incoming charge, Mehboob said GP is a professionally run multinational company and it will take effective steps in line with market demand.

He said of the 14 crore people of the country currently 1.5 crore have the economic capacity to maintain a mobile phone. For more growth of the sector he proposed to reduce duty on handsets from Tk 1,500 to Tk 1,000.

Aktel subscribers can pay mobile bills thru' Vanik credit card

Aktel cellphone subscribers will be able to pay their mobile bills and purchase Aktel products through Vanik credit card.

A memorandum of understanding (MoU) to this effect was signed

between TM International (Bangladesh) Limited (TMIB), the owning company of Aktel mobile phone, and Vanik Bangladesh Limited, says a press release.

Sayed Husain Jamal, managing director of Vanik Bangladesh, and Md Nasir Bin Bahrom, managing director of TMIB, signed the MoU recently in Dhaka.

Asked about company's plan to face the challenges of BTB's mobile phone that is likely to hit market by the year end with reduced call rate and zero incoming charge, Mehboob said GP is a professionally run multinational company and it will take effective steps in line with market demand.

He said of the 14 crore people of the country currently 1.5 crore have the economic capacity to maintain a mobile phone. For more growth of the sector he proposed to reduce duty on handsets from Tk 1,500 to Tk 1,000.

Furniture fair begins today

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

In the face of stiff competition from foreign furniture, a four-day national furniture fair kicks off today in Dhaka to showcase strength of local furniture.

The fair titled 'National Furniture Fair 2004' will be held at Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Centre to make local consumers aware of the quality and price of the products.

Science and Information and Communication Technology Minister Abdul Moyeen Khan will

inaugurate the fair. State Minister for Education ANM Ehsanul Haque Milon, Advisor to Commerce Ministry Barkat Ullah Bulu and Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry President Abdul Awal Mintoo will also attend the function.

Show organiser Bangladesh Furniture Industries Owners' Association (BFOIA) hopes the fair will instill confidence in locals.

They are optimistic that the visitors would find local furniture better than the imported ones.

The exhibition will remain open

to visitors from 10:00am to 8:00pm until Saturday.

Forty-one companies engaged in manufacturing furniture will take part in the fair to display their products that include furniture, wooden floors, carpets and lighting items in 109 stalls, the organisers said.

Ten furniture-manufacturing companies currently export furniture and earn \$20 lakh a year, industry sources said.

Bangladesh imports furniture worth around Tk100 crore a year.

EU launches fund for Asian developing states

AFP, Brussels

The European Commission on Tuesday launched a five-million-euro (6.1-billion-dollar) trust fund to provide trade-linked expert assistance to developing countries in Asia.

The Asia Trust Fund - to be managed by the International Trade Centre, a Geneva-based UN agency - aims to provide short-term Trade-Related Technical Assistance (TRTA).

The Commission noted that it already offers trade-linked expertise to Asian developing countries, covering a number of fields such as technical barriers to trade, standardisation, and intellectual property rights.

But it said "there is an additional and urgent need for a flexible tool that can deliver short-term expertise."

"Developing countries need support to acquire the institutional capacity required to deal with complex trade negotiations," said the Commission, the EU's executive arm.

India set to meet fiscal deficit target

REUTERS, New Delhi

India is set to achieve its fiscal deficit target in the current year despite duty cuts made as part of the government's inflation-busting measures, the government's chief economic adviser said Monday.

"There is no question it will not happen," Chief Economic Adviser Ashok Lahiri said when asked about India's fiscal deficit target of 4.4 percent of gross domestic product in 2004/05, which was below the previous year's 4.8 percent.

The government cut import duties on petrol, diesel and steel and slashed the excise duty on petrol, in August and reduced tariffs on edible oil imports this month to try to control inflation, which has jumped to a 3-1/2-year high.

Lahiri also said import growth was buoyant and domestic capital goods production remained healthy -- both encouraging signs of sustained growth -- in Asia's fourth-largest economy.

Int'l tax to fight poverty faces political obstacles

AFP, United Nations

The UN expert panel that proposed an international tax to fight poverty, endorsed by France and Brazil on Monday, acknowledged that the plan faces political obstacles.

The experts' report admits that the proposal is highly controversial and at the current time not politically feasible, but urges the international community to begin serious discussions on implementing such a tax.

"The goal of a fairer globalization cannot be achieved unless resources are available on a larger scale to support countries in their efforts to participate in the global

economy, and to provide other important global public goods," says the report, which was released in February.

"One proposal which has been suggested is to tax the use of global resources, in particular the global commons," it says.

The primary subject of that tax would be a levy on carbon emissions, according to the report which notes that it would also contribute to environmental sustainability.

But there is vehement opposition to the concept, particularly from the United States, a fact mentioned by the panel which also points out that there is no mechanism for collecting

"There is no global institutional framework with the necessary political authority to determine tax burdens and decide resource utilization," it says, adding that debate on the matter should begin.

"We believe that this is an important issue, on which discussion of possible practical actions should be encouraged," the report says.

Rato signals stronger IMF role in rich countries

REUTERS, New York

The new head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) Monday signaled the lender would take a larger role in speaking out about policies in the world's richest nations if they pose global economic risks.

The IMF is better known for trying to keep developing economies on the straight and narrow than for admonishing industrial nations.

But Rodrigo Rato took a bolder tack in a speech to the Council on Foreign Relations, warning that imbalances in the United States, Japan and Europe presented the biggest medium-term threat to the

world economy and urging authorities there to fix them.

Moderator Paul Volcker, Alan Greenspan's predecessor as chairman of the US Federal Reserve, noted it would take "a certain amount of courage" to take on such giants, which are not used to taking advice from institutions like the fund.

Rato said the Washington-based IMF could use its annual economic reviews of member countries, as well as other statements, to alert the public and financial markets to global trade imbalances, which many economists fear could spark a sharp adjustment in the dollar and global disruption.

The United States should reduce its record fiscal and current account deficits, while the European Union and Japan should push for more vigorous growth through structural reforms, Rato said.</