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Uplift of Dhaka-Ctg corridor can halve poverty by 2015

Draft ADB report on economic corridor says

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Bangladesh's quest for a seven-percent GDP growth and halving poverty by 2015 can be achieved by developing infrastructure along the Dhaka-Chittagong Economic Corridor (DCEC), a draft report by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) on the corridor says.

The Manila-based lender agency in its draft recommended a multi-lane access-controlled toll way, a new rail track, feeder container ship service and refined oil products pipeline between Chittagong and Dhaka to face the fast increasing traffic growth and ignite country's growth engine.

According to the draft, the corridor comprises 16 percent area of Bangladesh but presently accounts for 40 percent of gross domestic products. The corridor handles about 50 percent of country's total exports and imports.

Development of the corridor which covers Dhaka, Narayanganj, Comilla, Feni, Gazipur, Narshingdi, Brahmanbaria, Munshiganj, Chandpur, Lakshmipur, Noakhali and Chittagong can accelerate growth and provide economic potential to other parts of the country, ADB said.

Projecting a four-fold traffic growth by 2020, the ADB report called for massive infrastructure development in Chittagong Port including deepwater facilities and enhanced capacity to handle growing containerised traffic.

The multilateral development finance institution suggested complete automation of the port services and New Mooring terminal in the premier seaport that handles nearly 85 percent of the country's seaborne traffic.

With completion of Bangladesh-Myanmar highway by 2006 which links Bangladesh to 40 countries through the Asian Highway, the seaport can become a transit point especially for Myanmar, India, landlocked Nepal and Bhutan, ADB said.

The bank finds serious deficiencies in the capacity of Chittagong Port where container ship turn-around time is 5-6 days against only 1-2 days in Singapore and Bangkok.

The cost of handling container in Chittagong Port is double the amount charged in neighbouring ports. Though container cargo is increasing rapidly, ADB says, the port does not have a crane capable of handling full container load.

Through development of DCEC, Bangladesh has high potential to become a transshipment centre for the entire South Asia Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation (Sasec). The Sasec grouping involves Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal.

"The concept of an Asian Industrial Corridor and a Bengal Bay Industrial Triangle proposed by Japan International Cooperation Agency could be revived combining Sasec with the Asean (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) grouping," the draft report said.

The ADB incorporates infrastructure development requirements in the corridor in areas like port, rail, road, inland waterways, energy, information and communication technology and sub-regional co-operation.

The bank suggested the key infrastructure be owned by the government but operated by private sector. For efficient management and regular maintenance of infrastructure, ADB proposed 'toll concession' model, which allows operators collecting toll from users.

The bank called for removing restrictions on inter-country vehicle movement and signing transit agreements among the countries.

"As a principal transport corridor of Bangladesh, DCEC provides potential sub regional linkages to northern states of India through Jamuna bridge to West Bengal as well as to Bhutan and Nepal," it noted.

Currently, the seaport handles 22.5 million tonnes cargo including 7,50,000 TEUs (twenty equivalent unit) container which ADB estimates will go up to 28 million tonnes and 1 million TEUs by 2006 and 100 million tonnes and 3 million TEUs by 2020.

PHOTO: STAR

Visitors crowd at a stall at the national furniture fair at China-Bangladesh Friendship Conference Centre in Dhaka yesterday. The fair witnessed huge response from customers.

Port efficiency key to RMG edge in quota-free regime

Politicians observe at discussion

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Development of backward linkage industries and improved service at seaports are key to face the post multi-fibre arrangements (MFA) from next year, observed speakers at a discussion meet.

They said the ready-made garment (RMG) sector of Bangladesh can compete in the quota free world by reducing cost by increasing efficiency of Chittagong Port.

They observed that integrated efforts of ruling and opposition parties, garment factory owners and workers can help the highest export earning sector to overcome challenges of quota-free regime.

Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union Federation organised the meeting on the upcoming expiry of the multi-fibre arrangement (MFA) held at BIAM auditorium.

"It takes at least 53 signatures in Chittagong port to get clearance of an imported goods. The process should be easier," said Feroz M Hasan, national committee member of Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh.

Jatiya Party Chairman H M Ershad said it is apprehended that about three lakh RMG workers, mostly women, may lose job in the fallout of MFA phaseout.

Giving a picture of miseries of workers, he said they work in inhuman conditions, do not get reasonable wages and do not even get the appointment letter.

Golam Sarwar Milon, a leader of Bangladesh Jatiya Party, said International labour Organisation and Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association are working together to ensure better working environment and other facilities.

Awami League Presidium Member Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir said the RMG sector has potential to maintain competitive edge in post-MFA period if production cost and port complexities can be reduced.

Mahi B Chowdhury of Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh said the government must prepare a rehabilitation programme for the workers who may lose job due to the shock wave of quota-free age.

Md Zafrul Hasan, general secretary of labour wing of Bangladesh Nationalist Party, said the government has taken some short and long term projects to improve port and custom clearing situation.

President of Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union Federation Asma Begum presided over the discussion attended by garment workers.

Lexco okays 5pc dividend

Lexco Limited has approved a five percent dividend for its shareholders for the year 2003 except sponsor director.

The dividend will be distributed from the general reserve.

The approval was made at the annual general meeting of the company held in Dhaka on Thursday, says a press release.

Abdul Mateen, chairman of the company, presided over the meeting.

Mutual Trust Bank opens new branch in Chittagong

Mutual Trust Bank Limited has opened its new branch at Aman Bazar, Chittagong.

Chairman of the bank Syed Manzur Elahi inaugurated the branch on Sunday in Chittagong, says a press release.

Among others, Samson H Chowdhury, sponsor director of the bank, Hedayetullah, vice-chairman, Arif Dowla and Saidur Rahman Ratan, directors and Iftekhar Ali Khan, managing director, were present.

Transcom awards best bulb dealers

Transcom Electronics recently awarded dealers of Philips bulbs for the best performance in year 2003 at a two-day Transcom Light Dealers Conference 2004 in Gazipur.

A total of 117 dealers from eight regions across the country attended the function where seven dealers were awarded with Dhaka-Kuala Lumpur-Dhaka ticket with seven-day stay while another 18 dealers were awarded with Dhaka-Chiangmai-Dhaka ticket with four days stay.

Various other participants were awarded prizes including gold chain, Whirlpool refrigerator, Phillips colour television and Changhong colour television, says a press release.

Executive Director Obaidur Rahman Khan acknowledged the contribution of the participating dealers terming them business partners.

Sino-Bangla chamber AGM held

The annual general meeting of the Bangladesh-China Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCCCI) was held in Dhaka on Thursday.

FR Siddiqui, president of BCCCI, presided over the meeting. Science, Information and Communication Technology Minister Abdul Moyeen Khan and Commerce Minister Altaf Hossain Chowdhury were present at the meeting, says a press release.

Among others, Chinese Chargé d' affaires in Dhaka Duan Zhi Quan and Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry President Abdul Awal Mintoo attended the AGM.

Furniture fair faring fine

Fetches huge spot orders in three days, ends today

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The first-ever National Furniture Fair being held at China-Bangladesh Friendship Conference Centre is gathering pace with consumers placing orders well beyond expectations.

The participants said they are satisfied with the turnout of visitors and added they are expecting to fetch more orders today, the last day of the fair.

Md Alauddin, gallery manager of Partex Furniture, said in the first two days they received bookings worth Tk 13 lakh. "We expect more orders today (Friday) and tomorrow with the number of visitors expected to be far more than the first two days."

Md Hussain Mukta, executive (Sales) of Navana Furniture, said they are not taking any spot bookings. "We are participating in this edition of the fair only to familiarise the visitors with our products."

Unique Furniture of Chittagong said all their furniture on display has been sold.

Terming the fair a unique buyer-seller meeting ground, AUM Mostafizur Rahman, chief executive and designer of the company, said the fair has provided them with a perfect venue to showcase their products before the Dhaka consumers as they do not have an outlet in Dhaka.

Organisers say the number of visitors yesterday crossed the 11,000-mark until yesterday evening and is expected to go up on the last day. A total of 17,000 visitors attended the exhibition on the first two days, said Iqbal Khan, director of Communicare Events, the co-organiser of the fair.

A total of 45 companies are participating at the exposition. Most of them are offering five to 20 percent discount on products on display. Bangladesh Furniture Industries Owners' Association (BFIOA) has organised the fair.

Talking to The Daily Star, some of the visitors however expressed concern over the high prices, saying the products are too expensive and beyond the reach of the middle-class.

"The local furniture products deserve praise and I had no idea about the quality of our products," said Nasreen Kader, a housewife.

Another visitor, Farooq Ahmed, said although he had a plan to order for a dining table, he thought better of it, as he found the prices to be too high.

Ferdousy Rahman, an eminent singer, said, "Our manufacturers are producing high-quality furniture. But the import of furniture should be restricted to perk up this sector."

Asked about the prices of the products, most of the participating companies said it is difficult for them to cut down on the prices since they have to import raw materials for producing furniture.

The four-day fair comes to a close at 9:00pm today.

Remote location stands in way of making jute competitive

International Jute Study Group suggests 'whole jute plant' use to produce pulp

PORIMOL PALMA

Remote location of paper mills from the jute fields is standing in the way to implementing recommendations of the International Jute Study Group (IJSG) to use 'whole jute plant' for producing pulp, a raw material needed to produce paper.

High cost of transportation and procurement problem in collecting green jute are cutting down on the edge of jute production, according to the IJSG.

A project study on 'Biotechnological application of enzymes for making pulp/paper from green jute/kenaf' by IJSG in 2001-03 reveals that alternative use of green jute would be environment friendly and commercially viable as well.

"If jute is to be carried from Comilla to Chandraghona, the product will lose its competitiveness," an official at the Ministry of Jute said, seeking anonymity.

Dr Golam Mohiuddin, the project leader, pointed out that the argument does not hold water for North Bengal Paper Mills, as jute grows in abundance in the area. "So, that mill can go into immediate production."

He said the mill could consume the entire supply of green jute plants. "Besides, the mill can use bagasse and other materials throughout the year to keep it running."

Talking to The Daily Star, Dr ABM Abdullah, executive director of Jute Diversification Promotion Centre, said the government plans to establish small factories with annual production capacity of 3,000 tonne pulp in areas where jute grows widely.

He said the process of collecting information about machinery to set up small pulp industries is going on.

Abdullah suggested the conventional methods of jute collection to peel green fibres off the plant and sell them after drying need to be changed.

He expressed the government's will to make best use of green jute plants and keep the mills running throughout the year.

"For this jute needs to be cultivated in an organised manner over a large area so that the mills can buy the cash crop directly from the farmers," Dr Abdullah said.

Now, only Karnaphuli Paper Mills, one of the four state-owned paper mills, is in operation. The other public paper mills Sylhet Pulp and Paper Mills, North Bengal Paper Mills and Khulna Newsprint Mills are out of action and enlisted for privatisation.

China urges US to scrap textile import quotas

REUTERS, *Beijing*

China has called on the United States to scrap limits on textile imports by the end of this year as scheduled, saying any move to adopt new tariffs would violate global trade rules, state media said Friday.

China's textile industry is expected to reap huge benefits when an agreement that restricts textile trade between members of the World Trade Organisation expires on Dec. 31.

US textile makers, worried that a flood of inexpensive Chinese products will bellow aside their products and cost many jobs, have said they will formally ask Washington to impose new tariffs before the current quotas evaporate.

When China entered the WTO in late 2001, it agreed to let the United States adopt temporary safeguards if rising imports of a given product from China were deemed to be harming domestic manufacturers.

But Beijing objected to Washington considering such tariffs before US industry had been affected.

"Accepting these applications openly disobeys WTO rules, and will seriously hurt Chinese companies and people and influence China's fulfilment of WTO commitments," the China Daily quoted an unidentified Commerce Ministry official as saying.

"The old quota system has for a long time greatly restricted the textile exports of developing countries, hindered their comparative advantages, and overturned the free trade principles of the WTO," the official said.

Earlier this month, US Commerce Under-Secretary Grant Aldonas said the safeguards could be imposed based on either actual market disruption or the threat of such disruption. The safeguard tariffs would limit the increase in textile shipments from China at 7.5 percent above this year's level.

Bill Gates retains top position on list of richest

AFP, *Washington*

Bill Gates kept his ranking atop the richest people in the United States, boosting his worth to 48 billion dollars, but investor Warren Buffett edged closer, Forbes magazine said Friday.

Forbes's ranking of the 400 wealthiest people in the United States featured Microsoft co-founder Gates at the top for the 11th consecutive year. Gates's net worth increased by two billion dollars from a year ago, Forbes said.

But Buffett, chairman of the Berkshire Hathaway investment group, boosted his net worth by five billion dollars over the past year to 41 billion dollars.