

GP cuts 25pc call tariff for pre-paid phones

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

GrameenPhone's pre-paid subscribers calling GP phones from today will enjoy a reduced call tariff of Tk 4.5 a minute from Tk 6.0, a 25 percent reduction.

The pre-paid subscribers however will pay Tk 5.5 a minute to call cell phones of other operators.

The new call tariff, under a special scheme called 'My Choice', was announced by GP Managing Director Erik Aas yesterday in Dhaka.

Subscribers have to send an SMS to 888 to activate 'My Choice' service. Total activation cost will be Tk 27 including charge for an SMS. The pre-paid subscribers will have to send an SMS after every 30 days to get the service.

GP will also introduce electronic recharge system and launch GPRS (General Packet Radio Service) for faster and permanent Internet access via mobile phone, Aas told reporters.

"Prices are going down constantly and we will come up with many more new offers and services," he said.

"Mobile phone is no longer a tool of luxury or comfort, it is increasingly becoming a tool for communication," Aas added.

Aas said the company is in the process of introducing electronic recharge system for its pre-paid subscribers, who make up 90 percent of its 2.5 million users.

"This would enable customers to buy whatever amount of charge they want," he added.

"Only three percent of the country's population uses mobile phone," Aas said adding that GP expects 15 million peo-



PHOTO: STAR

GrameenPhone Managing Director Erik Aas (2nd from left), Sales and Marketing Director Mehboob Chowdhury (right) and Head of Communications Syed Yamin Bakht pose for photographs at a function in Dhaka yesterday to announce the cell phone company's new call tariff for pre-paid phones.

ple to be using mobile phones by 2007.

Analysts predicted that launching of pre-paid service by Egyptian telecoms company Orascom early this month would trigger a price war in the rapidly growing mobile market.

In a series of price reduction scheme, GP had earlier enhanced pre-paid validity to 31-day from 21-day with an additional incoming

facility for a week. The leading operator of the country, in another move, has offered handset and connection at a cheaper rate of Tk 3,800 with Nokia set.

Aas said GP will also expand its network coverage to 80 percent of the population by the year-end from 55 percent at present.

Replying to a query, GP Sales and Marketing Director Mehboob Chowdhury said the company has a

plan to revise the entire tariff scheme. He, however, said there is no plan to enhance validity of recently launched Tk 50 pre-paid cards.

Mehboob, referring to launching of electronic refill system, said it will be a revolutionary service.

Syed Yamin Bakht, head of communications, also spoke at the function.

ADB approves \$7m loan for tsunami aid in Sri Lanka

AFP, Manila

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) said here Saturday it had shifted seven million dollars from a rural finance loan towards aid for tsunami-affected communities in Sri Lanka.

The funds, originally part of a rural finance development project approved in 2003, will instead be lent out in microcredit loans to households devastated by the December 26 tsunami that hit the region.

The reallocation is expected to reach 14,000 households, the ADB said in a statement from its headquarters in the Philippine capital.

"Emergency credit will help them quickly overcome the massive disruption and shock they have experienced to their livelihoods and income sources," the ADB added.

An assessment by the ADB and other foreign lenders found that Sri Lanka will need more than 1.5 billion dollars for its reconstruction and rehabilitation effort following the December disaster which left at least 31,000 dead in that country.

The quake-spawned tsunami also destroyed an estimated 400,000 jobs in 200,000 affected families, of which three quarters were already among poor and low income households, the ADB said.

The ADB previously said it would shift up to 50 million dollars from current projects in Sri Lanka to aid tsunami victims and is preparing new emergency assistance totaling between 100 million and 150 million dollars.

US tells Arab Bank to halt wire transfers

AFP, New York

US regulators Friday ordered the Jordan-based Arab Bank, the target of lawsuits by the victims of suicide bombers in Israel, to cease wiring funds and opening new accounts at its New York branch.

The Office of the Comptroller of the Currency cited the bank's inadequate controls on fund transfers, which have reportedly been under investigation for possible money-laundering violations.

"The inadequacy of the branch's controls over its funds transfer business is especially serious in light of the high-risk characteristics of many of the transfers," the OCC said.

Lawsuits filed in US courts have specifically charged the bank with paying money to the families of suicide bombers run by the radical Islamist group Hamas.

Gary Osen, one of a team of lawyers representing the relatives of the victims of the suicide bombers, gave a qualified welcome to the OCC order.

"This isn't the time to declare victory," Osen said in a statement. "The OCC has taken an important step to close their American operations, but it's only a small step in the right direction. We're a long way from a full reckoning."

Toyota to start producing cars in Argentina

ANN/ THE DAILY YOMIURI

Toyota Motor Corp plans to start production Monday in Argentina of innovative international multipurpose vehicles (IMVs)--models designed for overseas markets.

Under the IMV project, the carmaker procures parts from overseas production bases, produces vehicles at overseas plants and exports them to overseas markets. The carmaker intends to make the Argentina plant a base for exports to Brazil and other newly emerging markets in South America so it can compete with U.S. and European automakers in the region, according to sources.

Toyota started the IMV project in Thailand in August and has since made the IMV project its main strategy to enter newly emerging markets in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Central and South America. The company aims to cut costs and improve efficiency through the overseas bases. Five models, including a pickup truck and a sport-utility vehicle, have been developed under the project.

The Argentina plant will be the company's third production base for IMV models following the production launch in Indonesia in September. The company plans to produce IMV vehicles in South Africa as well in the near future.

Ecneec okays 8 projects involving Tk 2,860cr

UNB, Dhaka

The Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (Ecneec) yesterday approved eight projects worth Tk 2,860 crore, including Tk 1,228 crore in project aid.

Finance and Planning Minister and alternate chairman of Ecneec Saifur Rahman chaired the meeting in Dhaka.

The projects include reconstruction of narrow bridges and culverts on national and regional highways (a part of RRRMP- 111 revised) under Communications Ministry, Greater Dhaka Power Supply Project phase-4(revised) under Power Division, Air Quality Management

Project (revised) under Forest and Environment Ministry, construction of Bogra district stadium complex(revised)under Ministry of Youth and Sports.

The other projects are preservation of the right bank of the Padma river in Pakanarayanpur area in Chapainawabganj sadar and Shibganj upazila, construction of spar at Hasnarpura, Chandan Baisha, Sahara Bari and Banijan to control erosion by the Jamuna river, construction of national highway from Bhulta, Nayapur bazar to Modonpur on the Dhaka-Chittagong highway, converting Tongi-Kaliganj-Ghorasal-Panchdona road to regional highway and construction of bridge on

the Sitalakkhya river in Ghorasal (2ND revised) under Water Resources Ministry.

LGPD Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, Industries Minister Motiur Rahman Nazami, Communications Minister M K Anwar, State Minister for Finance and Planning M Anwarul Kabir Talukder, State Minister for Youth and Sports Md Fazlur Rahman, State Minister for Power Iqbal Hasan Mahmud and State Minister for Water Resources Advocate Goutam Chakrabarti attended the meeting.

Cabinet secretary, members of the Planning Commission and high officials concerned were present.

India, France sign revised civil aviation agreement

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

In another boost to burgeoning civil aviation market, India and France have signed a revised bilateral civil aviation agreement that would allow Indian private airlines to fly to Paris after London, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore.

The agreement signed in Paris has incorporated provision for multiple designation of airlines, allowing Jet Airways and Air Sahara to use landing rights given to India.

The accord also more than doubles the number of flights between India and France to 35

services per week from 14 at present. This, travel industry sources said, is expected to bring down airfare between the two countries.

State-owned Air India is the only Indian carrier now to fly to Paris while Air France operates flights to Delhi and Mumbai and has the right to fly to Kolkata and Chennai.

Under the revised accord, Air France can expand its operations to some other Indian cities including Bangalore and Hyderabad.

Civil aviation ministry sources said revised and liberal bilateral agreements with Germany and Hong Kong are also in the offing.

The government had recently

liberalised bilateral aviation agreements with the United Kingdom and reached an open sky accord with the US.

The liberalised accords have already led to reduction in airfare in key areas such as South East Asian destinations and the Persian Gulf.

India's Jet and Sahara have already got the clearance to fly to Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, London, New York after the present Congress-led government came to power. Earlier during the BJP-led government, they were allowed to fly to Saarc countries

Annisul Huq reelected BGMEA president



UNB, Dhaka

Five office bearers of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) were elected yesterday with Annisul Huq being reelected president.

Four others are First Vice-president Abdus Salam, Second Vice-president Anwar-ul-Alam Chowdhury (Parvez), Vice-president Mohammad Shahidul Islam and Vice-president (Finance) Faisal Samad.

"The office bearers were elected from among the directors newly elected for 2005-2006 term," said a BGMEA announcement.

Oil prices end higher on bullish outlook

AFP, New York

World oil prices rebounded from earlier declines on both sides of the Atlantic on Friday to close higher as brokers switched off their trading screens for the weekend break.

Oil prices in New York closed out the week well over 51 dollars as bullish comments from Saudi Arabia's influential oil minister and freezing temperatures in the northern hemisphere continued to buoy the market, analysts said.

New York's main contract, light sweet crude for delivery in April, closed up 22 cents at 51.49 dollars a barrel.

In London, the price of Brent North Sea crude oil for delivery in April, spiked 17 cents to 49.61 dollars a barrel.

Oil market-watchers said prices had rebounded as traders purchased extra crude options to cover themselves against further price gains early next week.

India unveils rail budget

AFP, New Delhi

India unveiled a populist railway budget Saturday, leaving passenger and freight rates untouched for a second year and announcing a host of new trains for the country where rail is the main form of long-distance travel.

Railways Minister Laloo Prasad Yadav, known for his "common man" appeal, told Parliament he planned to start 46 new trains, extend routes of 27 others and had ordered surveys to create 31 new lines.

Yadav, whose regional RJD party is locked in a tight battle for re-

election in the poverty-ridden state of Bihar, cut freight rates on items such as kerosene and cooking gas used by the poor and announced discounts to rural students as part of the package of concessions.

India's more than 150-year-old British-built rail system that crisscrosses the nation of one billion people is one of the world's largest and is used by 13 million travellers daily.

With 1.6 million workers, it is the world's biggest civilian employer.

As part of the 512-billion rupee (11.7 billion dollar) spending plan for the financial year ending March 2006, Yadav announced a five-year

modernisation drive to make "Indian Railways the best railway system in the world".

It called for introduction of new high speed trains linking the capital New Delhi with other cities, new lightweight freight wagons and increased speeds for freight trains on certain stretches.

The railway budget has been traditionally watched for clues to whether the national budget, to be introduced Monday, will be expansionary. But economists say that linkage no longer held as the government now is legally compelled to cut India's stubbornly high fiscal deficit.

Yukos asks court to reconsider dismissal

REUTERS, Houston

Russia's Yukos said on Friday it had asked a US bankruptcy judge to reconsider her dismissal of the embattled oil company's bankruptcy case.

Yukos said in a statement it believed US Bankruptcy Judge Letitia Clark erred when she issued her dismissal order on Thursday, and argued the company would be hurt by her refusal to grant US

jurisdiction in the case.

Judge Clark ruled the US courts had no jurisdiction in the case, and said the dispute between the company and the Kremlin belonged in a forum where Moscow would participate.

Yukos, which sought bankruptcy protection in Houston in December, has complained it was the victim of a Russian government-orchestrated campaign to destroy it and former owner Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who is

facing a 10-year prison term for fraud and tax evasion.

"Yukos, our shareholders, creditors and our employees are clearly better off if we are able to continue with our bankruptcy base in the US Court," Chief Executive Officer Steven Theede said in a statement on Friday.

The company said on Thursday that it was also mulling taking its appeal to the higher US District Court.



PHOTO: STAR

Awami League General Secretary and former commerce minister Abdul Jalil (sitting centre) along with others poses for photographs at the closing ceremony of the three-day Chittagong Apparel, Fabric and Accessories Exposition (CASAXPO) 2005 at CJKS Gymnasium in Chittagong yesterday.