



PHOTO: STAR

EVERY PROBLEM IS UNIQUE, SO IS THE SOLUTION: Participants of the National Mathematical Olympiad 2007 show victory sign at the Olympiad venue at St. Joseph High School in Dhaka yesterday. The Prothom Alo and Dutch-Bangla Bank organised the event.

Missed the millennium? Catch it in Ethiopia

REUTERS, Addis Ababa

The countdown has started on a flickering billboard high above a roundabout in Ethiopia's capital, blinking out recently in red and gold letters: only 207 days, 15 hours, 22 minutes and 22 seconds to the Millennium.

Seven years after much of the world marked the beginning of the 21st century, Ethiopia is finally approaching the year 2000, thanks to a unique and ancient system of measuring time.

A variation on the archaic Julian calendar -- which started disappearing from the West in the 16th century -- means Ethiopia will not enter the year 2000 until September 12 this year.

"When everyone else celebrated their millennium, they said all sorts of things were going to happen, but nothing happened," Addis Ababa-based film director Tatek Tadesse said.

"Now all the prophecies they made about 2000 will happen this time round on the true Mille-nnium.

It will be a new age for Ethiopia," said Tatek who is putting the final touches to a film inspired by the historic event.

Unlike the Gregorian calendar used widely in the West, Ethiopia's version squeezes 13 months into every year -- 12 months comprising 30 days each and a final month made up of just five or six days depending on whether it is a leap year.

Time is also measured differently in the Horn of Africa country. Days start at dawn rather than midnight.

"There is lots of opportunity for confusion when it comes to times and dates," said Tamrat Giorgis, editor of the country's largest English-language business newspaper, Fortune.

"One person can say let's meet at 4 o'clock and the other can mean 10 o'clock and you get lost in between. There are companies which close their books according to the Gregorian calendar and there are some companies which do everything by the local calendar," he added.

The dating system has its roots in the ancient Ethiopian Orthodox Church which, like Orthodox churches throughout the world, did not follow Pope Gregory XIII's decision to abandon the Julian calendar for the Gregorian one in 1582.

"But there is no serious debate about changing it. There would be a storm if anyone tried to change the Ethiopian calendar. In Ethiopian society, people are very proud of their heritage," Tamrat said.

HUGE PARTIES

Civic groups and travel companies are lining up to announce the

first plans for huge parties to mark the moment.

An appeal for 200 million Ethiopian birr went out to pay for the official celebrations.

Festivities will include a nationwide music festival, a series of cultural conferences, the planting of 56 million trees, and building a national academy for 2,000 poor but gifted students.

The cash-strapped country also hopes to get something more long-lasting out of the publicity -- a chance to change its image as a land beset by famines, floods, wars and civil unrest.

"We want to show the world that poverty is not Ethiopian," said Mulugeta Aserate Kassa, communications chief for the Secretariat to the Ethiopian Millennium Festival National Committee, the body responsible for the official celebrations.

"We want to show the world that we are a patchwork of nations... hopefully it will result in an attitudinal shift in Ethiopia as well. Mutual tolerance has not been one of our strengths in the past," added Mulugeta, a second cousin to Ethiopia's last emperor, Haile Selassie.

Nonetheless, plans for the party are being made in turbulent times: Ethiopian forces joined Somali government troops in December to oust Islamists from southern Somalia, Ethiopia's border dispute with Eritrea is still unresolved, there has been civil unrest inside Ethiopia.