Star BUSINESS
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SKILLED WORKERS FOR AUSTRALIAN JOB MARKET

Govt to examine scope for foreign vocational training

PORIMOL PALMA

Bangladesh in a bid to build up itself for the Australian lucrative job market has now put its efforts in improving workers' skills through imparting them various vocational trainings in partnership with some educational institutions of the employer country.

On receipt of a recent letter from the Bangladesh High Commission in Canberra informing about the prospective job market, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has already requested the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment to convene an inter-ministerial meeting to set what should be done in this regard.

High Commissioner M Humayun Kabir in his letter said Training and Further Education (TAFE), an educational institute of New South Wales, has prepared a Bangladesh Capability Statement to cooperate in training Bangladeshi workers.

In an earlier letter, he figured out lack of formal training on specific trade, and difficulties in complying with Australian standard for skills that led to reluctance on the sponsors' part to hire the Bangladeshi workers.

The TAFE in its statement noted that Bangladesh runs no shortage of skilled workers, but it does not have a certification system, which made it tough for other countries to recognise the skill level of this country's workers.

The Bangladesh envoy informed the foreign ministry that he had already asked the TAFE for such vocational training, which, he suggested, could be provided either through partnership with a local educational institution or establishing a TAFE-NSW college here.

At the initial period, Humayun Kabir further suggested, it would be better to develop a pilot project comprising 5 vocational schools in Bangladesh to impart such professional training.

This would involve several stages of cooperation with the Australian side, such as, developing a joint training curriculum including English language courses, obtaining trainers from Australia and getting TAFE-NSW certification on the workers' qualification, he said.

Once they are certified by this institute of New South Wales in Australia, the successful candidates would be able to search for suitable semi-skilled job in that country.

The category of jobs includes plumbing, motor mechanism, hairdressing, commercial cooking, hospitality management, construction work, interior decoration and design and accounting, among others.

Besides technical support from TAFE-NSW, funding for such projects might be obtained from multilateral and bilateral donor agencies like AusAid, Asian Development Bank, World Bank and even from the host government, the high commissioner noted in the letter.

TAFE-NSW, which delivers vocational training to more than 5 lakh students every year, has already been in cooperation with Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Fiji and other Pacific island countries.

"On a long-term basis such a rigorous training regime may also help train up semi-skilled manpower for markets even beyond Australia, given the growing shortage of manpower in many other European countries," the high commissioner made an observation in the letter.

According to an Australian employment agency, Business Solutions, Australia normally allows 1 lakh skilled workers to enter the country every year under General Skilled Migration Programme.

Apart from a handsome salary package, the candidates selected for employment in Australia would be provided with a total relocation package, including transportation cost, initial accommodation and visa processing, it added.

Presently, about 40,000 Bangladeshis are working in Australia, while 222 Bangladeshi students are studying in the TAFE-NSW with majority in hospitality and accounting.

Syndicated loan of Tk101cr for RanksTel

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Twelve banks and financial institutions have arranged a syndicated loan of Tk 101 crore for RanksTel, a sister concern of Rangs Group.

An agreement to this effect was signed between RanksTel and the banks and financial institutions under the lead arrangement of Industrial & Infrastructure Development Finance Company (IIDFC) Ltd at a function in Dhaka on Thursday night.

The syndicated loan has been sanctioned for implementing the second phase of the private land phone operator, officials said.

The participants in the loan facility include National Bank Limited, Uttara Bank Limited, United Commercial Bank Limited, EXIM Bank Limited, Saudi-Bangladesh Industrial and Agricultural Investment Company Limited, IIDFC, Standard Bank Limited, Agrani Bank, Infrastructure Development Company Limited, Premier Bank Limited, Mercantile Bank Limited and First Security Bank Limited.

Addressing the function, President and Chief Executive Officer of RanksTel A Rouf Chowdhury said a tremendous potential lies in the country's telecom industry, especially for the private sector operators.

RanksTel, which started its journey on April 14, 2005, will carry out its second phase activities with the syndicated loan, he said.

The RanksTel officials said presently the company has around 60,000 subscribers and they target reaching the subscriber base at 300,000 by 2007.

"Our vision is to provide cost-effective telecom services across the country," Zakaria Swapan, chief operating officer (COO) of RanksTel, said, adding that except Dhaka city they have presence all the four zones of the country. "Particularly, we are operating in 71 upazilas in 24 districts," the COO said.

"We have already applied for license to operate fixed land phone in the Dhaka city," he added.

At present, revenue income of RanksTel, which has around 350 employees around the country, is more than Tk 7 crore per month.

Among others, IIDFC Managing Director Mahmood Malik, Uttara Bank Consultant Sheikh Aminuddin Ahmed, Standard Bank Managing Director Mosharraf Hossain and Mercantile Bank Managing Director Shah Md Nurul Alam spoke at the function.

WB, Indian chamber for energy trade between Saarc countries

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, *Mumbai*

A FICCI-World Bank research paper has suggested energy trade between Saarc countries to help overcome crippling shortage of energy in South Asia.

The paper released ahead of the two-day Saarc Business Leaders Conclave starting here from today suggests that public sector policymakers should focus on 'enhancing energy security' through trade rather than the costly proposition of full national energy self-sufficiency.

The business conclave will be inaugurated by Minister for External Affairs Pranab Mukherjee and leaders from Saarc (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) countries including Pakistan, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Nepal.

The paper stressed that countries importing electricity and natural gas should promote sectoral reforms to encourage internal trade within countries and an environment to evolve market price signals.

The countries should ensure that entities importing energy are financially solvent and creditworthy.

For energy-exporting countries, the paper said they should ensure a stable and attractive investment environment as well as stable supply to domestic markets to mitigate the risk of energy exports being diverted to domestic consumption.

The paper released by Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) and World Bank notes that India and Pakistan could serve as "pillars of regional integration in the eastern and western Saarc areas." The eastern and western cluster could be integrated into a region-wide integrated energy market.

"India would eventually bridge the two clusters into a unified energy market with integrated electricity and gas networks," the paper adds.

The eastern cluster will comprise Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka while Afghanistan, Pakistan and India comprise the western cluster.

For the eastern cluster, the opportunities include expanding India's bilateral electricity beyond Bhutan to Nepal and possibly gas and electricity imports from Bangladesh. The four countries then could link with Myanmar for gas exports.

In the western cluster, the priority options include expanding electricity imports from central Asia beyond Afghanistan to Pakistan and subsequently to India, the paper said.

The market serving a population of 1.5 billion is one of the largest in the world and with its size can mitigate risks of external shock, reduce costs, create profitable trading opportunities and attract investments, the paper stated.

The paper also notes the developments including rising electricity exports from Bhutan to India, and that India is looking at setting up a pipeline to transport natural gas from Myanmar and financing a coal power plant in Sri Lanka.

Also, India and Pakistan are pursuing possibilities of gas imports from Iran and Turkmenistan and if they materialise, it will integrate Afghanistan with both the south Asian and central Asian energy systems.

Standard & Poors upgrades rating for Citigroup

Standard & Poors (S&P), one of the world's foremost independent credit ratings providers, announced on Wednesday that it has raised its counterparty credit rating on Citigroup to 'AA/A-1+' from 'AA-/A-1+'. Thus the ratings on Citibank NA were raised to 'AA+', says a press release.

Earlier on September 27 last year Moody's Investor Services upgraded the ratings of Citibank NA to Aaa.

Announcing the upgrade, S&P cited Citigroup's 'strong earnings generation from an extraordinarily diverse set of businesses' and improvements in its control environment and strategy. It acknowledged Citigroup's investments to stimulate growth and 'very impressive' retail and corporate banking franchises.

PHOTO: STAR

President and Chief Executive Officer of RanksTel A Rouf Chowdhury and managing directors and senior officials of the participant banks and financial institutions in the Tk101crore syndicated loan arrangement for the land phone operator are seen at the agreement signing ceremony on Thursday.

PHOTO: STAR

Visitors gather at a stall at the US Trade Show 2007 that concluded in Dhaka yesterday.

EU energy ministers reject mandatory target for renewables

XINHUA, *Brussels*

The European Union energy ministers agreed on Thursday to increase the use of renewable energy, but refused to set a mandatory target for member states.

The EU energy ministers, who held a meeting here to hammer out a common energy policy, accepted the target set by the European Commission to increase the use of renewable energy to 20 percent of the EU's total energy consumption by 2020.

The commission made the ambitious proposal in its energy policy package released last month, aiming to ensure supply and out greenhouse gas emission.

In its wide-ranging package, the EU's executive arm had sought to make the target of renewables a mandatory one for member states, which has to be approved by EU leaders at a March summit.

However, the energy ministers, whose meeting paved the way for the EU summit, insisted that the target should be voluntary. Though some members like Germany and Spain are ready to achieve the goal, several countries see no priority of renewables over other sources.

On another proposed binding target of 10 percent for transport biofuels for the EU by 2020, the 27 EU member states did reach a conditional agreement. The bloc's current goal for biofuels is 5.75 percent by 2010.

African trade experts call for a single customs union

XINHUA, *Lusaka*

African trade experts from three regional blocs in east and southern Africa have called on the governments in the region to establish a single customs union to enhance trade.

The establishment of a single customs union is seen as an important component that would help some countries in the region that belong to more than one regional blocs to conduct their trade smoothly.

The experts from the East African Community (EAC), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) have been meeting in the Zambian capital of Lusaka since Monday with the aim of coming up with solutions on how to harmonize the trading arrangement in the region when all the regional blocs start implementing customs unions.

The World Trade Organization trade rules stipulate that a country should not belong to two customs unions. However, a number of countries in the region have multiple membership, a situation that has put them in a quandary on which customs union to choose to stay within.

Already, the EAC has implemented its customs union since 2005 while the COMESA would establish its customs union next year and the SADC in 2010.

Some countries such as Zambia have already begun consultations with different stakeholders to choose a regional bloc that best suits them.

COMESA Director of Trade, Customs and Monetary Affairs Charles Chantunya told Xinhua here on Thursday that the experts have recommended the establishment of a customs union as a viable solution to enhance trade in the region and solve the problem of multiple membership.

WEEKLY ROUNDUP

Turnover on both bourses fell

SARWAR A CHOWDHURY

Turnover on the stock exchanges fell last week due mainly to the imposition of trading restrictions on shares in five companies by the stock market regulator.

Dropped by 24.30 percent, the turnover on the Dhaka Stock Exchange (DSE) came down to Tk 534.50 crore against Tk 706.10 crore the previous week. On the Chittagong Stock Exchange (CSE), the total turnover declined by 22.78 percent coming down to Tk 103.01 crore against Tk 133.40 crore the previous week.

Market analysts said the Security and Exchange Commission's (SEC) move, which placed the shares of five companies under spot trade, forced the bourses to witness low turnover most of the days in the week, as the SEC's initiative holds back the inter-category money adjustment facility.

On February 11, the SEC directed both the bourses to place Brac Bank, Power Grid Company of Bangladesh (PGCB), Dhaka Electric Supply Company (Desco), Summit Power and Eastern Cables under the spot market, without money adjustment facility, instead of public market from Monday.

The SEC, however, withdrew the directive on February 14.

"The five companies shares are considered as big issues in the market. The investors can buy or sell the shares of the companies in line with the inter-category money adjustment facility. But, the securities were traded for same day trading and cash settlement, without the use of the adjustment facility, during the spot market trade. As a result, turnover also fell during that period," said an expert.

On a week-on-week basis, the DSE General Index lost 3.20 points, or 0.17 percent, over its close previous week finishing the week at 1851.71 points. The DSE All Share Price Index, however, rose by 17.15 points, or 1.14 percent, to close at 1517.67 points on Thursday, the last trading day of the week.

The CSE Selective Categories Index fell by 3.16 percent ending the week at 2735 points while the CSE All Share Price Index declined by 1.33 percent closing at 4197.62 points.

Out of 263 issues, 236 were traded on the DSE and of them 112 gained, 107 declined and 17 remained unchanged. Out of 137 issues were traded on the CSE, 39 advanced and 84 made losses with 13 remaining unchanged.

On the DSE last week, the total transactions dropped by 26.90 percent. A total of 87,705,713 shares were traded on the bourse, while 119,976,834 shares changed hands the previous week. On the CSE, a total of 23,155,935 shares were traded against 26,300,371 shares the previous week.

On the premier bourse, the top ten turnover leaders of the week were Power Grid Company of Bangladesh (PGCB), Brac Bank, Grameen Mutual Fund One, Pubali Bank, Dhaka Electric Supply Company, AIMS First Mutual Fund, United Commercial Bank, Lafarge Surma Cement, Square Textile and Mutual Trust Bank.

PGCB, the state-owned power company, topped the list of turnover leaders with 1,686,950 shares worth Tk 82.88 crore, accounting for 15.51 percent of the total market turnover.

On the port city bourse, the top ten turnover leaders of the week were Pubali Bank, Rupali Bank, PGCB, Brac Bank, AIMS First Mutual Fund, Lafarge Surma Cement, Grameen Mutual Fund One, Daffodil Computers, Square Textiles and Bextex.

Pubali Bank topped the turnover list with 115,970 shares worth Tk 11.41 crore.

At the end of week, the market capitalisation on the DSE stood at Tk 384,06 crore while the capitalisation on the CSE stood at Tk 310,58 crore.

Pact soon with Malaysia in interest of Indian workers

PTI, *New Delhi*

An accord for protection of interests of Indian workers in Malaysia is expected to be signed soon between the two countries in the wake of complaints of their exploitation and harassment.

Asserting that his country will not tolerate exploitation of Indian workers, visiting Malaysian Foreign Minister Dato Seri Syed Hamid Albar said here Thursday that most of the issues have already been resolved on signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU).

"Negotiations are proceeding well. We have exchanged documents and I hope it (MoU) can be finalised soon," Albar told a select group of Journalists here.

Malaysia hosts around 138,000 Indian workers and several of them have complained about exploitation mainly by unscrupulous agents and harassment by local employers.

Albar said though the problem of exploitation did not relate to Malaysia, his government wanted the problems of the Indian workers resolved.

US trade show ends

Telemedicine stalls pull crowd

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The three-day US Trade Show 2007 came to a close yesterday in Dhaka with many a visitors showing keen interest in telemedicine service offered by Grameenphone Ltd.

The cellphone operator introduced the service styled 'HealthLine' in November last year in cooperation with Telemedicine Reference Centre Ltd (TRCL), a local electronic medical consultancy firm.

"On all the three days of the fair, visitors enthusiastically wanted to know about the service and procedures to get access to the service as it was a very new offer to them," said Samir Majumder, an officer of Fabric Optic Network of Grameenphone.

"This is comparatively a new service in the country and it is very important to me that I have access to medical services at anytime just through a cellphone," said Saiful Hossain, a visitor.

Grameenphone provides this service with the help of TRCL that has employed more than 45 doctors who work in three shifts round-the-clock to provide the service.

"We usually receive between 20 and 30 thousand calls per day and we can entertain 15 calls simultaneously. However, the call receiving capacity will increase in near future," said Sikder M Zakir, managing director of TRCL.

He also said currently the company is providing services only for Grameenphone but it will expand its network in near future as other operators have shown interest in getting this service through TRCL.

As yesterday was the weekend, a large number of visitors also thronged other stalls at the show.

Around 58 exhibitors participated in the yearly event, which was co-sponsored by American Chamber of Commerce (AmCham) in Bangladesh and US Embassy in Dhaka.

The companies from sectors like banking, oil and lubricant, energy and power, machinery, leather, beverage, electronics and cosmetics took part in the show.

Oil prices ease in Asia

AFP, *Singapore*

Oil prices eased slightly in Asian trade Friday as the markets focussed on high US inventory levels and Opec left its demand growth forecast for this year unchanged, analysts said.

At 1:26 pm (0526 GMT) New York's main oil futures contract, light sweet crude for delivery in March, was down seven cents to 57.92 dollars a barrel from 57.99 dollars in late US trades Thursday.

Brent North Sea crude for April shed 20 cents to 57.40 dollars.

"In the short-term, the market is bearish as inventory levels are overall high and the (US) National Weather Service forecast shows weather in the northeast US is going to go above normal," said Tony Nunan, of Mitsubishi Corporation's international petroleum business in Tokyo.

Analysts at BMO Nesbitt Burns said in US trading hours that with the end of the heating season fast approaching "and Saudi resistance to more robust (output) cuts, current inventory levels have the potential to force prices lower in the near-term."

Saudi Arabia is the Opec cartel's biggest producer.

The Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (Opec) said Thursday it was maintaining its estimate for growth of oil demand in 2007 at 1.5 percent, in line with its previous monthly report.

US threatens to revive WTO piracy suit against China

AFP, *Washington*

The United States on Thursday threatened to revive a bid to drag China to the WTO over copyright piracy if bilateral talks sought by Beijing to fend off the action do not achieve a breakthrough.

Under pressure from Congress, the administration of President George W. Bush over the past year has been working to prepare a case challenging China's compliance with its World Trade Organization (WTO) obligations in the area of intellectual property rights enforcement.

Last October, Washington informed China that it would be filing such a case, but then agreed to hold off, with the support of US businesses, when Beijing asked for further bilateral discussion to address the American concerns.

No settlement has been reached so far.

"We are consulting with Congress and with industry on next steps," Deputy US Trade Representative Karan Bhatia told a Congressional hearing on China Thursday.

"If we believe that negotiations offer a reasonable chance of success, we will continue to pursue them -- a successfully negotiated outcome can be more efficient and as successful as a litigated outcome," he said.

"But if it becomes clear that negotiations will not be successful, then we will proceed with WTO dispute settlement," Bhatia said as legislators attacked China over what they saw as increasing infringement of intellectual property rights.

Speaking to reporters later, Bhatia said there were a number of issues being discussed with China in relation to enforcement, "but the bottomline, what we want to see, is improvement on the ground."

PHOTO: MIDAS FINANCING

Md Abdur Rashid Gazi, managing director of MIDAS Financing Ltd, and Alihussain Akberali, chairman and managing director of Bangladesh Steel Re-rolling Mills (BSRM) Ltd, exchange documents after signing a lease finance agreement recently. Under the deal, MIDAS will extend lease finance of Tk5 crore to BSRM. Senior officials from both the sides are also seen.