Star BUSINESS

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Experts against restrictions on migration of female workers

PORIMOL PALMA

Despite a huge prospect of overseas jobs for Bangladeshi female workers, effective promotional measures are yet to be taken, also to ensure legal protection for such workers in any foreign land, according to studies.

The country's missions abroad have not been built up in a way that helps smoothen migration of the female job seekers, nor any proper training is arranged for the workers before their migration.

Experts say the restrictions successive governments imposed on such a migration since 80s have rather aggravated the situation, which led to a rising risk of irregularities in the trade, trafficking and low remittances.

Streamlining the migration of female workers with providing sufficient training, legal protection and taking up rehabilitation programme for them in case of any odd situation arisen in any foreign land would have contributed significantly to the present annual 5 billion dollars remittance, they remarked.

They suggested that restrictions on migration of female workers should go and a monitoring system for them in any foreign land by human rights organisations will do.

Government restrictions on women's movement to foreign land were clamped in the 80s due to the growing religious sentiment among the people in power and media reports on sexual harassment and other maltreatments of female migrant workers, although there was no policy on such workers in the 70s.

However, the ban was lifted in 1991 just to make a new restriction on the migration of unskilled workers seven years later, considering it to be the best approach to protection of women and children from traffickers.

"In reality, this restriction could neither stop the female workers' migration, both in legal and illegal channels, nor did it help reduce their being vulnerable to trafficking," opined a study, conducted by Rita Afsar, a senior research fellow at the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies(BIDS).

According to the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), 62,114 female job seekers have so far migrated to different countries.

The migration experts say the actual number might be double.

In 2003, the government however allowed 8 recruiting agencies to send female workers to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as domestic helps saying that the females aging above 35, preferably married and accompanied by husbands, are entitled to such migration. The age range was made 25 to 35 in 2005.

In the month of November in that year, licensed private recruiting agencies were allowed to send female domestic workers to all the Middle Eastern countries on experimental basis for a period of six months under a set of conditions regarding pre and post migration management.

Besides a 30-day mandatory training, maintenance of a database of all the female workers at the Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (Baira) and monitoring their whereabouts round the clock during their stay in a foreign land through setting up of safe houses under the supervision of Bangladesh missions were made conditional.

The Baira was also asked to deposit an amount of Tk 1 crore with the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) to ensure it that any lapses in complying with the set conditions or any violation of rights of the workers would bind the Baira-member firms to compensate the affected workers from this deposited money.

The government also emphasised formation of a committee with representation from the manpower ministry, BMET and Baira for constant monitoring of pre- and post-migration management.

The Baira, however, considered such conditions 'too difficult' and preferred sending male workers abroad to migration of female workers, said sources in the trade body of overseas employment agents.

Facing the realities, many a female worker now tend to migrate illegally in assistance of a section of travel and recruiting agencies and aviation officials. Having an irregular status abroad, they lose minimum grounds to seek legal protection from the governments of the countries concerned and the Bangladesh missions, they said.

Rita Afsari's study found that more than two-thirds of the domestic help working abroad are the victim to maltreatments, which range from lack of sufficient and quality food, denial of rest hour and verbal abuse as well as beatings.

"Such wide-ranging maltreatment had serious implications for their health, including sufferings from various diseases like jaundice, eclempsia, gastroenteritis, fever and skin diseases for about two months on an average," the study noted.

Nahid Sultana, president of Swasti Samaj Kalyan Sangstha, alleged that the recruiting agents that are permitted for sending female workers abroad often do not care for obeying the condition of a 30-day training.

"The workers also are not willing for a one-month training due to lack of residential facilities," she said, citing an example that most of the Ansar-VDP members, who were sent to the KSA with proper training and are now looked after by the Bangladesh missions, are doing well.

"This is however not followed in the cases of others. The undocumented female workers are in the most vulnerable position," she observed.

The Migrant workers largely remain unaware of their legal rights and the functions of the labour attaches posted at the Bangladeshi missions abroad, Rita Afsari said.

A section of officials of the missions and labour attaches are in a nexus with recruiting agencies and employers to continue malpractice, the BIDS official alleged, adding that lack of adequate service motivation among the mission officials and technological facilities remain a barrier for the expatriate labourers.

A migration expert, Abdul Alim, said undocumented migration also hampers regular migration, as the receiving countries remain reluctant to issue visas to the workers, as incidents of abuses often occur beyond the knowledge of the Bangladesh missions because of the workers' undocumented status.

"Since all experiments and regulations failed to control migration of female workers, it will be a pragmatic step, if restrictions go and maximum monitoring in assistance with the human rights organisations is ensured," he suggested.

Ctg int'l trade fair ends

OUR CORRESPONDENT, *Chittagong*

As the 15th Chittagong International Trade Fair (CITF) ended here yesterday, authorities distributed prizes among participants.

Chittagong Chamber of Commerce and Industries (CCCI) President Saifuzzaman Chowdhury gave away certificates and crests. Unilever Bangladesh received 'Best Premier Gold Pavilion' award.

Otobi achieved 'Best Premier Mega Pavilion' award while Abul Khair Group and Jute Diversification jointly grabbed 'Premier Standard Pavilion' award.

Pakistan Pavilion of Pakistan, the partner country of the fair, achieved the award in foreign pavilion category.

Over 300 local and foreign stalls took part in the fair that began on February 15. The duration of the fair was extended by eleven more days following request by the participants.

At the concluding function, Fair Committee Chairman Syed Jamal Hossain, Chittagong chamber directors Amirul Hoque, Syedul Mostafa Chowdhury, Jahirul Islam Chowdhury, Habib Mohiuddin, Md Shahin Alam, Md Sajjad Ullah and Fahim Ahmed Faruq were present.

PHOTO: STAR

Chittagong Chamber of Commerce and Industries (CCCI) President Saifuzzaman Chowdhury gives away 'Best Premier Gold Pavilion' award to an official of Unilever Bangladesh at the concluding ceremony of the 15th Chittagong International Trade Fair in the port city yesterday.

'India to go ahead with Iran gas pipeline'

AFP, *New Delhi*

Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee signalled Monday that India intends to go ahead with a multi-billion-dollar gas pipeline from Iran via Pakistan despite objections from the United States.

"Talks on this pipeline are going on. When I was in Iran, I had categorically mentioned that we are interested in having this pipeline," Mukherjee said in an interview with the NDTV news network.

"Now negotiations are going on about the prices," said the minister, who made a two-day vist to Tehran last month.

Oil Minister Murli Deora also said last week that India was committed to the project.

The remarks come after a visit to India by US Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman, who has urged New Delhi to drop the plan.

Washington, which accuses Tehran of supporting terrorism and trying to make a nuclear bomb, says Iran will use the revenue generated from the pipeline to finance these activities.

Talks on the proposed 7.4-billion-dollar project began in 1994 but stalled due to tensions between rivals Pakistan and India but the discussions gathered momentum after the launch of a peace process between them in 2004.

Despite being US allies in its global "war on terror," India and Pakistan have said they want to go ahead with the 2,600-kilometre (1,600-mile) Iranian pipeline project as they need energy to fuel economic growth.

Iran plans to lay a pipeline from the giant South Pars gas field to carry 90 million standard cubic meters per day of gas.

On Saturday, the UN Security Council slapped new sanctions on Iran over its suspect nuclear weapons programme in addition to curbs imposed in December.

The fresh sanctions block all Iranian arms exports and freeze the overseas assets of 28 additional officials and institutions linked to Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes.

Intel to build $2.5b China chip plant

AFP, *Beijing*

US chip leader Intel said Monday it would build a 2.5-billion-dollar plant in China, a potential landmark moment in the Asian emerging giant's quest to become a high-tech manufacturing power.

The integrated wafer plant, called Fab 68, will be the first of its kind for Intel in Asia, bringing sophisticated technology to a nation more famous for its status as the world's low-end factory floor.

"We would likely look to put in production the most advanced technology that is available under our licensing policy from the US government at the time," Intel President and CEO Paul Otellini said, referring to US controls on the sale of potentially sensitive technology that may also have military uses.

Initially the plant, in northeast China's Dalian city, will focus on less advanced chipsets for computers although Intel did not rule out gradually incorporating more advanced technology.

"The opportunity to do other products is really wide open, so we will watch that as the market and various government regulations evolve," Otellini told a briefing in Beijing.

"Our objective is to have this be the most cost-effective wafer plant in our network and ... to be able to try out new technology and new techniques of manufacturing to lower our costs."

Construction of Fab 68, which will produce the 300-millimetre (12-inch) wafers on which microchips are built, is scheduled to begin later this year with production slated for the first half of 2010, the company said.

It is the first time since 1992, when Intel establised its Fab 10 in Ireland, that the company has built a plant from the ground up at a brand new site.

"Fab 68 will be our first new wafer fab at a new site in 15 years ... This new investment will bring our total to just under four billion dollars, making Intel one of the largest foreign investors in China," a company statement said.

When completed, Fab 68 will be part of an Intel network which by 2010 will include eight top of the line 300-millimetre factories, with other fabs located in the United States, Ireland and Israel.

The wafer plant nearly triples Intel's investment in China from its current 1.3 billion dollars, reflecting the growing importance of the country as a market in its own right and not just as an export base, analysts said.

PHOTO: SOUTHEAST BANK

Southeast Bank Ltd opened its 32nd branch in Shaymoli, Dhaka recently. Chairman of the bank Alamgir Kabir inaugurated the branch while senior officials, among others, were present.

Trade, travel on Saarc agenda: Indian FM

AFP, *New Delhi*

India says boosting trade and easing travel restrictions within South Asia will be the issues dominating a summit of the region's leaders here early next month.

"The objective of the upcoming summit will be to see that the spirit of Saarc (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) is translated at different layers," Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee told the Press Trust of India news agency in an interview.

"Visa restrictions have to be removed ... all these issues we will try to resolve at various levels, including at the summit level," he said in the interview, excerpts of which were released Sunday.

The New Delhi summit -- to be held on April 3-4 and attended by the heads of government of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka -- will formally welcome Afghanistan as its eighth member.

World powers the United States, the European Union, China and Japan, as well as South Korea will be attending the summit for the first time as "observers."

In his interview, Mukherjee said market reforms introduced by South Asian nations had ensured "all the Saarc countries have had good GDP growth over the last one-and-a-half decades, despite many problems and political uncertainties."

"But this is not reflected in the intra-regional trade," he said, noting that the volume of trade among Saarc countries was merely five per cent.

Mukherjee said a proposal would be considered to set up an energy grid to ensure energy deficient countries benefited from those in the region with a surplus.

He also said he favoured free movement within the region of professionals -- particularly from the IT sector, service industries and businessmen.

Formed in 1985, Saarc "aims to accelerate the process of economic and social development in member states," according to a statement on the group's website.

But more than two decades on, Saarc has few achievements to show for itself, mainly due to tensions between India and Pakistan.

Last year, New Delhi accused Islamabad of jeopardising a South Asian Free Trade Agreement that came into force on January 1, 2006 and was aimed at creating the world's biggest free-trade area.

The accord is seen as one of the best hopes of raising the living standards of more than 1.4 billion South Asians.

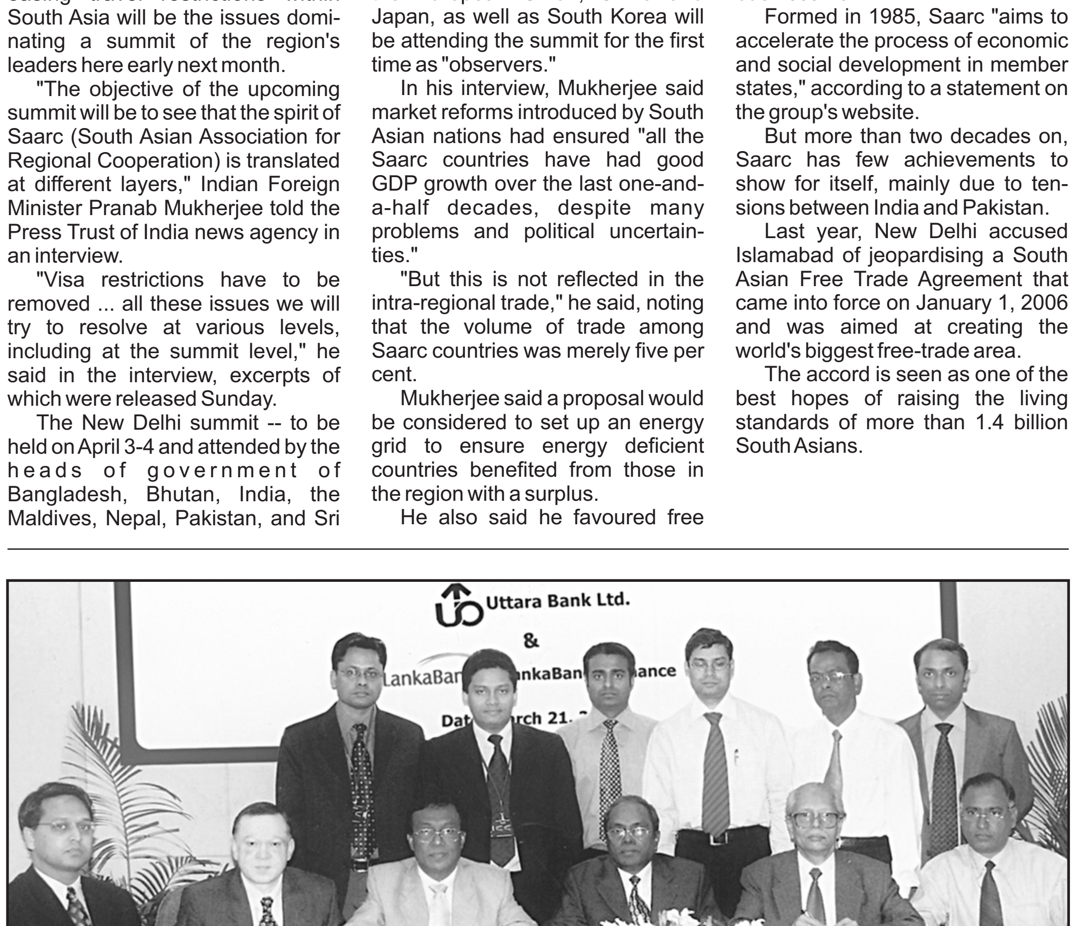

PHOTO: LANKABANGLA FINANCE

Shaikh Aminuddin Ahmed, consultant of Uttara Bank Ltd, and Mafizuddin Sarker, managing director of LankaBangla Finance Ltd, pose for photographs after signing a financing agreement on behalf of their companies recently. Under the deal, Uttara bank will extend a credit facility of Tk10 crore to LankaBangla for financing the latter's business activities.

Citigroup mulls cutting 5pc of its workforce

AP, *New York*

Citigroup Inc is considering cutting about 15,000 jobs, or nearly 5 percent of its work force, as part of a restructuring plan being developed to improve its financial performance, according to a report in Monday's edition of The Wall Street Journal.

Citigroup, which announced a cost-cutting review of operations last year, has come under heavy criticism from investors because its expenses grew faster than its revenue last year, reducing profits.

The newspaper report said that the review is being led by Chief Operating Officer Roger Druskin, who is set to report his recommendations internally by the end of the week. The newspaper cited unidentified people familiar with the matter.

Citigroup expects to disclose the cost-cutting plan by the time it reports first-quarter results on April 16, the day before the annual meeting, the Journal reported.

The newspaper said the cuts could result in a charge of more than $1 billion against earnings.

A call to a Citigroup spokeswoman before business hours on Monday was not immediately returned.

Charles Prince, the chairman and chief executive of Citigroup, told a company-sponsored financial services conference in late January that the New York-based bank still intended to grow by focusing on increasing its existing retail and commercial businesses rather than by acquiring other companies.

Citigroup in Australian court over insider trading

AFP, *Sydney*

The world's biggest bank Citigroup on Monday defended itself against a charge of insider trading in a case which could influence how investment banks around the world deal in shares.

Citigroup's Australian operation has been accused by the country's corporate regulator of insider trading and failing to manage a conflict of interest over the trade of stock in logistics company Patrick Corp in August 2005.

At the same time, a separate arm of Citigroup was advising another company, Toll Holdings Ltd, about a hostile multi-million dollar takeover of Patrick.

The Australian Securities and Investment Commission (ASIC) told the Federal Court in Sydney that the allegations against Citigroup were not of the worst kind.

However, Citigroup should have sought permission to trade shares in Patrick while it remained an advisor to Toll, counsel Brett Walker said.

Citigroup lawyer Allan Myers denied that the bank had any conflict of interest. The bank's traders did not know Citigroup's private arm was advising Toll on the Patrick takeover bid at the time, he said.

EU finance chiefs to mull economic impact of market rout

AFP, *Brussels*

EU finance ministers at a two-day meeting here are to take stock of Europe's economic outlook for the first time since a major financial market rout rattled investor confidence worldwide.

The ministers, meeting in Brussels, are also due to back separate plans to harmonise payments rules across the 27-nation bloc and ease restrictions on cross-border banking mergers.

The EU's finance chiefs have not had a huddle since global stock markets took a beating at the end of February after a nine-percent dive in Chinese stocks and amid growing concerns about the health of the US economy.

Although the European economy was not the source of the jitters, concerns arose in the wake of the market turbulence that it could suffer knock-on effects from a slowdown elsewhere, especially in the United States.

In a study prepared for the ministers, the European Commission said "the recent turbulence in global equity markets was too limited to have impacted significantly on the aggregate euro area or EU economic performance."

The market rout triggered a rise in the value of the Japanese yen against the euro, something the eurozone ministers had previously been calling for but with little result.

The European Union's executive arm is forecasting that the combined economy of the 13 nations sharing the euro will slow this year to 2.4 percent growth from 2.6 percent last year.

The risks to that forecast have long included the impact of rising interest rates, an oil price spike and a surge in the euro, but the growing prospect of a significant slowdown in the United States has cast a new cloud over the outlook.

UBS economists said in a research note that while the European economy would likely resist a US slowdown, it would not be completely immune either.

"We remain positive on European growth, but would not look for a complete decoupling from US economic developments," they said.

After eurozone ministers share their thoughts about their bloc's economic outlook on Monday evening, they are to widen the discussion on Tuesday when they will be joined by counterparts from the EU's 14 other member states.

But the focus on Tuesday will be the expected approval of plans to allow individuals and businesses to use payment cards and make bank transfers across the EU under the same terms as in their home country from next year.

Tourism takes a beating amid Lanka fighting

AFP, *Colombo*

Sri Lanka's tourism industry suffered a sharp drop last month as fighting between troops and Tiger rebels escalated and foreign holiday makers stayed away, the Tourist Board said Sunday.

Tourist arrivals to Sri Lanka fell 18.3 percent to 52,687 in February from the same month a year earlier, official figures showed Sunday, with the key markets of India and Germany posting the steepest falls.

The drop came after Sri Lanka had already lowered its forecast for tourism arrivals by 20 percent to 543,877 for this year.

Visitors from neighbouring India fell 29.9 percent to 7,350, despite hotels and the national airline SriLankan rolling out discount packages aimed at its northern neighbour.

Travellers from European destinations also stayed away as countries such as Britain, France and Germany issued negative travel advisories about Sri Lanka to their citizens, citing an escalation of a decades-old ethnic conflict in the island nation.

Arrivals from Germany fell 22.1 percent to 4,068.

Fighting between troops and Tamil Tiger rebels has led to a sharp decline in bookings during the winter season, which is the peak time for the local leisure industry, the figures showed.

The tourist board has rolled out a 500-million rupee (4.6-million dollar) campaign to promote Sri Lanka in India, Europe and China this year.