

Star BUSINESS

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New five-star hotel opens Pahela Baishakh

BSS, Dhaka

Dhaka Regency Hotel and Resort, another five-star hotel, will be launched in the capital city on Pahela Baishakh, the first day of the Bangla new year (April 14).

Addressing a press conference yesterday, Executive Director of the hotel Kabir Reza said the hotel would be the biggest and most modern one in Bangladesh.

Only a five-minute drive from Zia International Airport, the 15-storied Dhaka Regency is situated on two-lakh square-feet of land with modern shopping mall facilities.

The 310-room hotel was built at a cost of Taka 300 crore under a joint venture of local entrepreneurs and Bangladeshi nationals living in Britain.

Kabir Reza hoped that the hotel would fulfil a long-felt demand of the local and foreign traders and other VIP guests and would also help expand tourism sector in the country.

Another Executive Director Arif Motahar was also present at the press conference.

MIDAS Financing chairman reelected



Md Ikramullah has been reelected chairman of MIDAS Financing Ltd for a period of another two years with effect from March 31.

He was reelected at a meeting of the Board of Directors of the company held recently, says a press release.

WTO to hold first meet on Iraq membership

AFP, Geneva

The World Trade Organisation will hold its first meeting on Iraq's accession process next week, some two and a half years after the country first launched its membership bid, trade sources said on Wednesday.

Iraq applied to join the global trade club in October 2004. Its oil-dependent economy has been ravaged by decades of sanctions followed by spiralling violence and unemployment since the US-led invasion in 2003 to topple Saddam Hussein.

The WTO working party will meet on Friday, April 20 in Geneva to begin its examination of Iraq's foreign trade regime and consider its next steps, trade sources said.

The United Nations last month hosted a conference on Iraqi economic reconstruction, and called on Baghdad to ensure its oil wealth is equitably distributed amongst all ethnic groups.

Health, safety checklist launched for RMG units

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

In a bid to ensure a decent working environment in the RMG industry, a unified code of conduct, 'Health and Safety Checklist', was launched yesterday in Dhaka.

The health and safety checklist initiated by the ten international RMG brand buyers in Bangladesh, will also help local RMG unit owners by standardizing buyers' requirements.

The initiative to establish the checklist for the garment units came from the buyers' as a response to the drastic unrest in Bangladesh's garment sector in May 2006.

The checklist will soon be distributed to 1000 RMG units so that local manufacturers can follow international standards. A total of 200 workers have been killed due to the lack of fire control management in garment units since 2000.

The Buyers Forum of

Bangladesh developed the checklist aided by the International Finance Corporation (IFC) and SouthAsia Enterprise Development Facility (SEDF). Charles Whiteley, first secretary (Political, Economic, Trade and Press Section) Delegation of the European Union of Bangladesh, formally launched the checklist at a hotel.

Whiteley said the checklist offers a useful illustration of the fact that simple measures can make the difference between life and death and that significant improvements in working conditions need not entail enormous costs.

He said, "It is perfectly possible to improve economic performance and competitiveness whilst fostering acceptable working environments."

Terming such initiatives a part of the EU's strategy of promoting decent working conditions around the world, he said to make the

checklist work in Bangladesh's garment industry, good channels of communication between workers and management are needed.

Bangladesh exported \$8 billion worth of RMG goods last year. A total of 2.5 million workers are employed in the sector, 80 percent of them women.

"The local garment manufacturers can now satisfy buyers by following the code of conduct," said Mrinal Sircar of IFC-SEDF.

Basirun Nabi Khan, code of conduct manager of H&M, an international RMG brand company, said it is a tool for local suppliers by which they can maintain minimum global standards.

Christoffer Falkman, social compliance auditor of KAPPAHL, presented a keynote paper on features of the checklist.

Trading powers bid to save Doha talks in Delhi

AFP, New Delhi

The four lead players in the Doha Round of global trade talks held bilateral meetings on Wednesday ahead of a new attempt to save the negotiations, but hopes for a breakthrough were slim.

The gathering marked the first time trade ministers of the G-4 trading powers – India, Brazil, the United States and the European Union – have assembled for talks since the Doha discussions collapsed last July when Washington refused to yield more ground in cutting farm subsidies.

US Trade Representative Susan Schwab, EU Trade Commissioner Peter Mandelson, Indian Commerce Minister Kamal Nath and Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim were holding bilateral sessions in the Indian capital to discuss positions ahead of Thursday's G-4 session, an Indian government official said.

Thursday's meeting will cap a series of bilateral interactions that have been under way since the breakdown of the World Trade Organisation talks – billed as a once in a generation chance to lift millions out of poverty.

Mandelson said before arriving

in New Delhi that the talks were "timely and important" and warned that negotiations must be accelerated or "Doha's prospects for this year will be lost."

But US officials have been downplaying expectations for Thursday's meeting, calling it a "stock-taking" effort. Ministers of Australia and Japan were slated to join the G-4 late on Thursday for more talks.

The most that can be hoped "is for people to come on the same page and agree there is a need to move forward," said T.S. Vishwanath, head of international trade policy at the Confederation of Indian Industry.

The WTO is racing against the clock to conjure up agreement in the Doha Round before the end of June when the fast track trade negotiating powers of US President George Bush expire.

A deal between the world's two biggest trading powers, the United States and EU, and the two leading developing nations India and Brazil, is seen as vital to hopes of brokering a compromise among the WTO's 150 members this year.

Developing nations are pushing the United States and other wealthy nations to slash farm subsidies,

while poorer countries are being squeezed to allow more access to their markets.

If a breakthrough can be achieved by June, a conclusion to the Doha talks could be reached in about eight months, WTO officials say. Otherwise the Doha round, launched in the Qatari capital in 2001, faces years of delay.

"There doesn't seem to be any willingness to compromise so in that kind of situation, it's difficult to expect any favourable outcome," said D.H. Pai Panandiker, president of the RPG Foundation, an Indian economic think-tank.

Nath has said there is "no commitment by India on the deadline" and he would prefer no deal to a "bad deal."

"We want to go forward but the other nations have to meet the needs of developing nations – this is supposed to be the development round after all," an Indian government official told AFP.

Developing nations are being pressed to open their markets wider to industrial goods and services while developed countries are supposed to slash farm support and allow in more agricultural imports in return.

Japan to outpace US but deflation risks remain: IMF

AFP, Washington

Japan will grow faster than the United States this year as it emerges from its long slump but the central bank should keep interest rates low to beat stubborn deflation, the IMF said Wednesday.

The world's second largest economy remains robust with private investment rising on the back of solid corporate profits and a pick-up in exports, the International Monetary Fund said in its twice-yearly World Economic Outlook.

Japan's economy is set to grow by 2.3 percent this year – better than a previous forecast of 2.1 percent and after a 2.2 percent expansion in 2006, the IMF predicted.

"A recovery in consumption is expected to largely offset some

cooling of exports in view of the anticipated moderation in global growth," the Fund predicted.

But Japan's growth will ease to 1.9 percent in 2008, slipping back behind the US economy where growth will pick up from 2.2 percent this year to 2.8 percent in 2008, it added.

Japan's recovery stalled briefly in mid-2006 mainly due to a drop in consumption, but the economy rebounded strongly in the fourth quarter of 2006, the IMF noted.

"Near term prospects depend crucially on whether the rebound in consumer spending in the fourth quarter is sustained," the report said.

In this regard underlying fundamentals appear favourable thanks to the hiring of more full-time workers by Japanese companies –

which should lead to rising wages, helping to lift consumer spending, it added.

But the IMF also voiced caution over lingering deflationary pressures after Japan's consumer prices fell for the first time in 10 months in February.

"While the growth outlook is favourable, inflation readings have remained uncomfortably close to zero," the report said.

"The primary focus should remain on ensuring robust growth and a decisive departure from deflation. Thus, monetary accommodation should be removed only at a gradual pace and on the basis of evidence confirming the continuing strength of the expansion," the Fund recommended.

Pakistan to export wheat to India

PTI, Karachi

Two Pakistani traders have inked a deal to export around 4,000 tonnes of wheat to India.

Najeeb Balgamwala, chief executive of Seatrade Private Limited, one of the leading commodities trading companies in Pakistan, said the two traders had inked a deal with India for exporting the wheat in May and June, but the sale is subject to certification from Indian authorities.

"It is not a big shipment but it is a start. They will export up to 4000 tonnes of wheat in this deal," he said.

In the international market at current prices, the shipment would cost around US\$ 900,000.



PHOTO: STAR

Visitors admire the skilled craftsmanship on show at the five-day handicraft and pottery fair that opened in Dhaka yesterday.

Sino-ROK FTA suggested

AFP, Seoul

China and South Korea should push to increase annual two-way trade to 200 billion dollars soon, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao said Wednesday before wrapping up a two-day visit.

Wen called for the two nations to pursue studies into a free trade agreement, saying trade "has an inordinate amount of potential for growth."

Their two economies are complementary, he told Chinese and South Korean business leaders at a lunch. "Korea leads in technology and management while China has plenty of labour resources and a large market."

China is already South Korea's largest commercial partner. Trade between Asia's second and third largest economies reached 134 billion dollars last year.

"A China-Korea FTA would be significant in the long-term development of bilateral economic trade," said Wen, who was to go on to Japan later Wednesday.

South Korea has been reluctant to rush into an FTA with China amid fears that cheap food could flood the domestic market.

But South Korean officials said they would consider starting free trade talks with China, after Seoul and Washington sealed a trade agreement last week.

Use of technology needed to revive pottery, handicraft

Five-day show kicks off in Dhaka

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Bangladesh's pottery and handicraft industries are on the brink of ruin due to a lack of market access and no real government policy support, speakers observed at the inauguration of a handicraft and pottery fair in Dhaka yesterday.

In order to save the industries, product diversification and the implementation of modern technology is urgently required, they maintained.

"It requires ensuring market access, bringing diversity in products and blending modern technology with the age-old craftsmanship," former adviser CM Shafi Sami said while inaugurating the event at Shishu Academy in the capital.

Around 120 handicraft and pottery makers from across the country are showcasing their clay works, jewellery, handloom products, cosmetic and woodworks at 73 stalls in the fair styled 'National Handicrafts and Pottery Fair Trade Fair 2007'.

Ecota Fair Trade Forum, a platform to promote the local pottery and handicraft industries, and International Institute of Technology and Management (IITM) are jointly organising the five-day show.

The fair focuses on the craftsmanship of the rural artisans who otherwise could not afford to highlight their products in the mainstream market, organisers said.

The Daily Star and ATN Bangla are media partners of the fair, which is open to all from 9:00am to 7:00pm every day with a five-taka entry fee. The fair will remain open until 10:00pm on Pahela Baishakh, the first day of Bengali New Year.

Ziaul Haque, chief executive officer of IITM, and Rina Khaled, country director of Practical Action, also spoke.

ACC, judicial reforms on agenda of ADB annual meet next month

UNB, Dhaka

Issues relating to Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) and judicial reforms in Bangladesh would come up for discussion at the annual meeting of Asian Development Bank (ADB) in Manila early next month.

"ADB will continue its support to the government's anti-corruption measures," ADB Country Director Hua Du told reporters yesterday after a meeting with Finance and Planning Adviser Dr Mirza Azizul Islam at his Planning Ministry office.

Hua Du, who will lead the Bangladesh team, apprised the adviser of the Bangladesh agenda to be discussed at the annual meeting of the development partner.

Major issues like power, energy, transport, education and governance will also come up for discussion, she said.

"We don't have any specific suggestion on the prices of gas and electricity," the ADB chief in Dhaka said, replying to a question.

She, however, added that the more the government pays in subsidy to close the gap between the prices of production and sales, the more it will have to ignore the important sectors like education and health.

Hua Du said the World Bank, ADB and DFID have an integrated plan to invest in Bangladesh's power sector.

India, Kuwait sign labour welfare pact

PTI, Dubai

India and Kuwait on Tuesday signed a landmark labour agreement, incorporating steps for job protection, checking the exploitation of workers and ensuring the payment of salaries and other benefits promised at the time of recruitment.

The memorandum of understanding was signed by visiting Overseas Indian Affairs Minister Vayalar Ravi and Kuwaiti Social Affairs and Labour Minister Sheikh Sahah Al-Khalid Al-Hamad Al-Sabah.

Ravi said unorganised labour and maids would also be brought under the purview of the agreement, which is similar to one signed with the UAE recently.

The MOU will streamline the 540,000-strong Indian labour force in Kuwait and safeguard the rights of workers.

It is likely to include a clause to bring Indian domestic sector workers under the purview of the ministry of social affairs and labour. Currently, domestic labour is governed by immigration rules of the interior ministry.

Agreement with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman and Qatar are also expected to be reached shortly.

Earlier, addressing the Indian community at a function in Kuwait City Saturday, Ravi said the Indian government is keen on protecting the rights of workers, especially domestic help. The government is exploring the possibility of bringing the sector under the labour law, he remarked.

China to lift ban on Japanese rice imports

AFP, Tokyo

China agreed Wednesday to lift a four-year ban on Japanese rice imports ahead of a summit between the Asian powers, Japanese officials said.

The two countries signed an agreement allowing Japan to ship rice to China later this year, a farm ministry official said.

China in 2003 banned rice imports from Japan, saying insects were found in a shipment, and efforts to resume the trade had earlier faltered amid tense relations between the two countries.

China is the world's largest rice consumer, although it is self-sufficient. Japan, which heavily protects its rice farmers, is looking to tap a market among wealthy Chinese consumers for high-end rice.

The agreement was signed between Japanese farm minister Toshikatsu Matsuoka and Li Changjiang, director of the Chinese General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine, the farm ministry official said.



PHOTO: MUTUAL TRUST BANK

Mosharrar Hossain, managing director of Mutual Trust Bank Ltd, and Moshir Rahman, managing director of Credit Rating agency of Bangladesh Ltd (CRAB), shake hands after signing an agreement recently. Under the deal, CRAB will conduct credit rating for the bank. Senior officials from both the sides are also seen.



PHOTO: HSBC

Trevor J McDonald (2-R), general manager of Dhaka Sheraton Hotel, and Steve Banner, chief executive officer of HSBC Bangladesh, shake hands at the inauguration of an ATM (automated teller machine) booth of the bank at the hotel yesterday. This is the 21st ATM booth of the bank.