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## Cellphone firms seek more time for user re-registration

MD HASAN

The country's mobile telecom operators have asked the industry regulator to extend the deadline for subscriber re-registration amid fears that millions of customers could have their phones cut off at the beginning of next week.

The Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission's (BTRC) deadline for re-registration expires on December 16. The BTRC earlier said it will ask for the lines of those who have not re-registered to be closed.

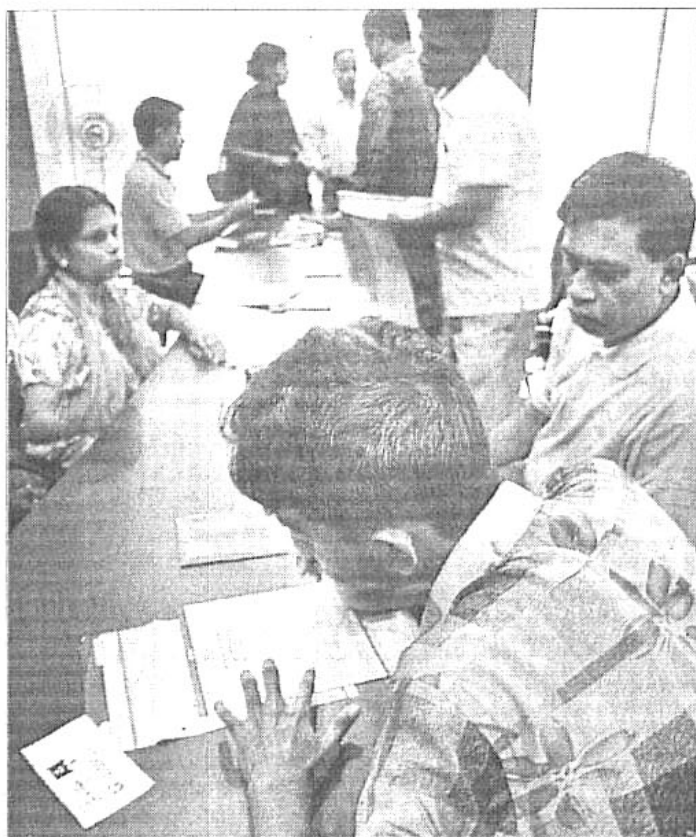
However the mobile operators say the re-registration process is proving complex, especially in rural areas where many customers lack the necessary documentation, and they need more time to complete the process.

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, a high official of BTRC admitted that they have received the operators' request to extend the deadline.

"The BTRC has yet to make an official decision," the BTRC source said although he hinted that it is likely that a two-month extension will be granted.

BTRC issued an order to Grameenphone, AKTEL, Banglalink, CityCell and Teletalk to re-register customers who bought connections before February 28, 2006. According to mobile phone operators, 10 million customers need to re-register.

The BTRC's first deadline,



A file photo shows subscribers of state-run cellphone operator Teletalk re-registering at a centre of the operator recently at Purana Paltan in Dhaka.

October 16, expired with only 25 percent of the affected customers re-registering. This prompted the BTRC to extend the deadline to

December 16. But just before five days before the current deadline is to expire, the mobile operators urged the govern-

ment that the timeframe should be extended as re-registration activities hampered in the Sidr-affected South-West region.

"We are conducting the re-registration, but it is not at a satisfactory level," said a high official of a leading cell phone company.

To re-register customers must produce a SIM (subscriber identification module) card, two copies of passport size photo, passport or any photo ID card (like the office ID card or driving licence) and the forms and documents given during subscription.

Re-registration is especially difficult in rural areas where many people do not have any kind of photo ID card. If the customer does not have a photo ID card, he/she will have to fill in a BTRC form and get it attested by a first class gazetted officer or by the local ward commissioner.

Sometimes it is very difficult for rural customers to reach a first class officer or their ward commissioner or union council chairman as some of them became fugitives after the state of emergency was declared, said another official of a mobile phone company.

"Certainly, we need time," said the official, adding that the problem of registration would be simplified when the national ID cards are introduced next year.

The total number of mobile phone subscribers has reached 32.33 million at the end of October 2007, according to BTRC.

## Dhaka urges Saarc bloc to cut cross border telecom costs

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Posts and Telecommunication Adviser Mirza Azizul Islam yesterday urged the Saarc member countries to work together to cut cross border telecommunication tariffs.

"I see the South Asian telecommunication market as a big market. We hope to work closely with our neighbour Saarc (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) countries to foster greater cooperation in reducing call tariffs with a view to forging a better network in the region," he told the ninth meeting of the South Asian Telecommunications Regulators Council (SATRC) while inaugurating it at a hotel in Dhaka.

Asia Pacific Telecommunity (APT) and Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) jointly organised the five-day meeting.

The adviser said, "Our government's stand is clear. We must continue to liberalise the telecommunication sector and go further in facilitating a congenial life in the region."

He, however, said, "We should not be oblivious of national security issues."

The adviser considers South Asia as the most promising region for telecommunication investment.

APT Secretary General Amarendra Narayan also stressed regional co-operation to provide quality network for the people.

"We can increase our intra-regional trade flow if we can provide quality telephony network through hooking the South Asian countries on a common network," he suggested.

Kinley T Wangchuk, chairman of SATRC, Toshiyuki Yamada, deputy secretary general of APT and Shaikh Khurshid Alam, secretary for the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications were present at the meeting.

## 3 private bus services in Dhaka merge operations



A file photo shows a crowd of passengers battling to get on a bus in Dhaka. Three private bus services in the capital have merged their operations, a move that transport experts said could herald the beginning of consolidation in the city's chaotic traffic system.

SOHEL PARVEZ

Three private bus services in Dhaka have merged their operations in a move transport experts said could herald the beginning of consolidation in the city's chaotic traffic system.

The operators - Megacity Bus Company, Raza City Bus Services and Metropolitan Bus Service merged their operations on the Motijheel-Mohammadpur route last month.

Now instead of rival buses from the three companies battling for customers on the streets the vehicles run one after another with passengers buying their tickets from a single shared counter. The ticket allows them to travel on any of the three companies' 70 buses operating on the route.

"We have merged our operations to provide better services to passengers. Operating separately was creating unhealthy competition and traffic jams," said Azam Khan Munna, managing director of Megacity Bus Company Ltd.

The consolidation, a new phenomenon in the sector, is in line with the recommendations of the 20-year Strategic Transport Plan for Dhaka, which sought \$3.52 billion to construct new roads and railways to meet travel needs and ease congestion by 2024.

Dr M Rahmatullah, former director of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and transport policy adviser of Transport Sector Management Reform Programme of the Planning Commission, said the move would help reduce unhealthy competition among the buses.

"It is a very healthy sign and the beginning of a process of bus transport consolidation to ultimately achieve bus route franchising, a system that is used in all developed countries and well off developing countries," he said.

Megacity Bus' Azam Khan said that the operational merger did not mean the companies were joining each other financially. "We have loans to different financial institu-

tions. That's why, we have kept our accounts separate," he said.

Apart from streamlining services, the merger has also led to job losses with the number of employees on the route being reduced from around 500 to 300. Yesterday those remaining complained that this had increased their workload.

"Now I am busy selling tickets all the time," said one employee, "but my salary remains the same as before at Tk 2700."

Awlad Hossain Raza, managing director of Raza City Bus, said they took the initiative to stop the intense competition between ticket sellers that sometimes led to the mauling of 'dragging' of customers by eager sellers.

"These practices have reduced and passengers now know that a bus they can get on will arrive soon," Raza said.

Raza said it would take some time before the new arrangements became profitable for the operators.

## GP, AKTEL IPO plans deadline extended

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Two leading cell phone operators, Grameenphone and AKTEL, are yet to submit detailed proposals on their initial public offerings (IPOs) to the Telecoms regulator, as the BTRC has extended the submission deadline to next week, sources said.

At the end of November the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) asked the mobile phone companies to submit IPO proposals to the commission by yesterday.

In the proposals the cell phone operators are supposed to draw a roadmap, which will include eight conditions, for their IPOs. According to sources, the conditions include the valuation method, the IPO timeframe and bank statements.

Grameenphone and AKTEL sources said the timeframe given by the BTRC is too short to fulfill the regulator's conditions. Moreover the BTRC is itself preoccupied organising the ninth conference of South Asian Telecommunications Regulators' Council that began in Dhaka yesterday.

## Deal with Swiss govt signed to avoid double taxation

UNB, Dhaka

Bangladesh and Switzerland yesterday signed an agreement for avoidance of double taxation, paving the way for improved economic relations between the two countries.

Internal Resources Division (IRD) Secretary and National Board of Revenue (NBR) Chairman Muhammad Abdul Mazid and Swiss Ambassador to Bangladesh Dora Rapold signed the agreement on behalf of their respective sides at the NBR conference room, said a press release.

The signing of the agreement marks an important landmark in bilateral economic cooperation. The agreement is expected to contribute to favourable conditions for Swiss investments in Bangladesh.

A number of large Swiss companies have investments in Bangladesh since independence in different sectors such as pharmaceuticals, food and dairy, cement, etc. Swiss investment in the country now stands at US\$ 118.49 million.

A business body called 'Switzerland Bangladesh Business Forum' (SBBF) was formed in Dhaka in 2004 to facilitate trade and investment cooperation. Currently, the forum has 32 members.

## EU's planned duty-free import rules to harm textile sector

Mill owners fear

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Bangladeshi garments should use locally produced cloth and yarn if they are to gain duty free access to the European Union, the country's textile mill owners urged yesterday, warning that lifting such a condition within the next five years would harm the sector.

The comments came at a meeting between the Bangladesh Textile Mills Association (BTMA) and EU officials at which changes to the present rules for duty free access to the EU were discussed.

The EU is proposing to give duty free access to all industrial products from Least Developed Countries (LDCs) where it can be shown that 30 percent of the items value has been added in the LDC. This would enable local garment manufacturers to use imported cloth and yarn and still gain duty free access to the EU.

The move, is likely to be supported by garment manufacturers who believe it will free them of the

need to rely on local cloth. However some are concerned that 30 percent is too high a figure for the value added content.

At yesterday's meeting the BTMA said the conditions concerning locally produced cloth and yarn should be kept for the next five years as it strengthened the local textile sector and helped create an integrated industry.

President of the Bangladesh Textile Mills Association (BTMA) Abdul Hai Sarker said the local textile sector would lose its competitiveness in the world market if the EU follows the proposed 30 percent value addition method.

He said the advantage of the present duty free system, known as the Generalised System of Preference (GSP), was that it was well targeted at LDCs. A more general approach looking only at value added would allow developing countries to gain market share.

"We are afraid of 30 percent value addition method, because among the LDCs only Bangladesh

and Vietnam produce cloth and yarn," Sarker said.

He said local investors are unlikely to invest the huge amount of money needed in the textile sector if the EU finalises the proposed new GSP facility system.

Stefan Frowein, EU Ambassador in Dhaka, said he would convey the BTMA's message to the headquarters of the EU in Brussels.

"We are taking notes seriously. I understand the situation of Bangladesh. Our rule is to convey the happenings to Brussels. We are working as a link between you and EU. We are not decision-makers," Frowein said.

He said EU may start the discussion in this connection from early part of the next year to reach in a decision in early January 2009.

Trade adviser to the Delegation of the European Commission to Bangladesh, Zillul Hye Razi said Bangladesh still has the opportunity to conduct a thorough study in this regard to enjoy benefits from the proposed ROO.

## Construction works of Police Plaza Concord begin

Concord Group of Companies, a real estate company, yesterday formally started construction works of a multistoried shopping and office complex -- Police Plaza Concord -- at Gulshan-1 in Dhaka.

The project beside Gulshan Shooting Complex is a joint venture initiative between Concord Group and Police Welfare Trust, says a press release.

Noor Mohammad, inspector general of police (IGP) and president of the Police Welfare Trust, and SM Kamaluddin, chairman of Concord Group, among others, were present at a function organised to mark the launch of the construction works of the complex.

The complex will house different types of shops including showrooms, food courts, super shops, chain shops, mega shops, gymnasium, fitness centre, community space, and office spaces.

There will be three basements for car parking, two capsule lifts and 11 passenger lifts in the complex, which will also accommodate strong power supply system, standby generator and other modern amenities.



Artists' view of Police Plaza Concord, a multistoried shopping and office complex at Gulshan-1 in Dhaka. The construction works of the complex began yesterday.

## Oman lifts ban on recruitment of Bangladeshi workers

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Oman yesterday lifted its ban on Bangladeshi unskilled and skilled workers after 12 years and expressed interest in recruiting skilled labour from here.

The Middle Eastern country also handed over a draft memorandum of understanding for manpower recruitment to Bangladesh yesterday when visiting Omani Minister for Manpower Juma bin Ali bin Juma met Foreign Adviser Iftekhar A Chowdhury.

"Visa is open for all Bangladeshis to come to Oman," said bin Juma at a joint press-briefing after the bilateral meeting, where he also said Oman is looking for a wide-range of skilled workers, such as professors, doctors, engineers and mechanics.

Officials said the 12-year ban was imposed after a number of problems arose with Bangladeshi workers in Oman, but has been lifted in light of Oman's need and Bangladesh's ability to provide skilled workers.

Iftekhar said Dhaka is looking into signing the MoU and has told

Juma "We now have a strategy to develop skills. Both of our second language is English which is a tremendous advantage."

The MoU between the two countries is likely to be signed when Iftekhar visits Muscat at an undisclosed date.

This was the first visit by an Omani minister to Bangladesh since diplomatic relation was established 25 years ago.

Currently, there are 1.62 lakh Bangladeshi workers in Oman, with 15 thousand recruited to the country this year alone.

When the visiting minister's attention was drawn to the recent complaints by Bangladeshi expatriate workers of being unpaid by employers in countries such as Malaysia and Kuwait, Juma said that Omani labour law gives the same privilege to foreign workers as it does to locals.

A number of Omani businessmen accompanying the minister will visit a fish processing factory in Chittagong today and meet business bodies to explore investment opportunities here.

## Increase number of BDR outlets

Price monitoring body urges govt

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

A committee on monitoring prices of essentials yesterday suggested the government increase the number of BDR (Bangladesh Rifles) outlets in Dhaka to ensure adequate supply of essentials.

The government also needs to increase the number of mobile courts to make sure the quality of commodity products is fine, the committee also recommended in its monthly meeting held at commerce ministry.

Early this year the government introduced the 'fair price shops' run by members of BDR to bridge the soaring prices of essentials.

The committee also viewed that prices of all varieties of rice went up in markets during the last month due to supply shortage.

"We received several complaints from different quarters that the quality of products is deteriorating and the quantity of products

is declining at retail levels again due to lack of proper monitoring," a member of the committee said.

The monitoring committee, led by Additional Commerce Secretary Golam Mostakim, requested the government to exempt trucks and other vehicles carrying essential products from paying tolls at Jamuna bridge.

"If the government exempts the essential goods carrying vehicles from paying tolls, prices of essentials will come down," the member added.

The committee also requested the government to ensure supply of quality seeds and fertilizer across the country in the coming months to help farmers grow more vegetables and other crops.

"As the growers are still reeling from floods and a devastating cyclone, they need quality seeds to grow more products," the member added.

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