

International Business News

Scientists unveil corn genome

AFP, Washington  
US researchers have sequenced the corn genome almost in its entirety, a development that could help improve crops to meet growing global needs for food and fuel, a US university has announced.

Corn, also known as maize, is the world's top cereal crop followed by rice and wheat, and the second of those to have its genome sequenced, after rice.

"This first draft of the genome sequence is exciting because it's the first comprehensive glimpse at the blueprint for the corn plant," said Richard Wilson, director of the Genome Sequencing Center at Washington University in St Louis, Missouri.

Wilson directed the corn sequencing project, the results of which have been published online at [www.maizesequence.org](http://www.maizesequence.org).

He will officially unveil the work February 28 at the Annual Maize Genetics Conference in Washington, according to a statement posted Tuesday on Washington University's website.

The first draft covers about 95 percent of the corn genome, and researchers are going to devote the project's remaining funds to refining and finalizing it.

"Although it's still missing a few bits ... virtually all the information is there, and while we may make some small modifications to the genetic sequence, we don't expect major changes," Wilson said.



Japanese cellphones to turn into 'robot' buddies

AFP, Tokyo  
For those who feel a bit lonely just talking on the phone, a Japanese company is offering a cellphone that turns into a robot buddy ready to chat.

Softbank Mobile Corp.'s new mobile line looks like a small humanoid with attachable arms and legs, with the screen showing various faces.

The PhoneBraver will be released in April after a character in an upcoming television drama series entitled "Cellphone Investigator 7."

The telephone comes with enough artificial intelligence to learn the user's habits.

If the user calls a particular person many times, a text phrase such as "You're calling her often these days, aren't you?" might appear coming out of the face's mouth, according to Softbank Mobile spokesman Katsuhide Furuya.

The user could carry on conversations with the phone by responding "yes" or "no" or with other simple replies.

"We haven't decided on specifics yet on the communication between the user and mobile, but your mobile would grow into a buddy different from others that is unique in the world," he said.

The PhoneBraver does not move by itself but can strike a pose with movable joints. The price is not disclosed yet.

India faces big challenges to higher growth

AFP, New Delhi

India faces big challenges to boost economic growth to double-digits, the government said Thursday on the eve of an expected pump-priming budget seen as kick-starting its campaign for the next elections.

The statement came in the government's economic report card presented ahead of the budget Friday. Economists believe will contain spending measures to keep the ruling Congress party's support base among the almost two thirds of the 1.1 billion population who live on less than a dollar a day.

Asia's third-largest economy has moved "decisively to a higher growth phase" thanks to a pick-up in investment and savings, the annual Economic Survey said.

But maintaining growth at an average annual nine percent "will be a challenge" while raising it to double-digits -- regarded as crucial to lifting hundreds of millions of Indians out of deep poverty -- "will be an even greater one," the survey said.

"Optimism but with caution is the watchword" for the outlook for next financial year to March 2009, Finance Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram said as he presented the survey in parliament.

The economic survey projected growth for the financial year to March 2008 at 8.7 percent, down from 9.6 percent the previous year, but still second only to China.

Vietnam exports rise 29pc

ANN/VIET NAM NEWS

Viet Nam's export value in the first two months of the year reached US\$8.7 billion, up 29.2 per cent over the same period last year, according to latest data from the General Statistics Office (GSO).

Meanwhile, import value for the same period hit \$12.9 billion, soaring 63.7 per cent. The jump in imports has driven trade deficit in the first two months of the year to \$4.2 billion, representing 48.3 per cent of all exports.

The foreign-invested sector accounted for 58.6 per cent of all exports and nearly 50 per cent of total imports.

Economists from GSO said that escalating prices in world commodities markets have driven up Viet Nam's exports earnings, but also pushed up the costs of Viet Nam's major imports.

The nation's main export goods include crude oil, light industrial products and agricultural, forest and aquatic products.

In the first two months, crude oil exports declined 11.4 per cent in quantity to 2.3 million tonnes, but increased 46 per cent in value to \$1.68 billion. Textiles and garments increased nearly 42 per cent to \$1.5 billion, while footwear increased 25.3 per cent, to nearly \$770 million.

SMALL BUSINESS

A woman with good Ideas

SAYEDA AKTER

Colourful clay masks, wall hangings, jute bags and purses crowd the walls and shelves in "Ideas", a small store squeezed between the stairway and a bookstore on the first floor of Aziz supermarket.

Inside there is hardly room for customers to move between the decorated futua's (women's shirts) and jewellery dangling from hangers.

It's a Monday morning and Neepa Khaled, the owner, is easily able to handle a gentle trickle of students from the nearby universities in Dhaka's Shahbagh area. She has had plenty of experience. Ideas was set up in 1993 and over the past 15 years it has developed into one of the city's most loved gift shops.

In a country where entrepreneurship remains predominately a male preserve Neepa is a pioneer. Fifteen years ago she was the first woman store holder in the supermarket and she remains one of a small, although increasing group of women who run their own business.

"When I started, people who came into the shop were as interested in me as an owner as they were by my products," Neepa jokes between serving customers.

Neepa, an Economics graduate from University of Dhaka, started her career by selling handicrafts and clay ornaments at her father's bookshop.

"I was quite confused about getting involved with business, but my father taught us to respect our dreams. That made it possible," said Neepa.

With her father's inspira-



Neepa Khaled, owner of Ideas, a popular handicraft store in the capital's Shahbagh area, serves a customer at her shop. In a country where entrepreneurship remains predominately a male preserve, Neepa is a pioneer.

tion and support, Neepa redecorated the bookshop and opened "Ideas Crafts" with an investment of around Tk 2 lakh on the very first day of Bengali year (Pahela Boishakh).

"While I was a student, I attended many fairs arranged in the capital, such as at those by Alliance Francaise and

Bangla Academy and that inspired me to get involved," Neepa said.

She also participated in many training programmes mainly at Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC), Jatiyo Mohila Sangstha and National Youth Development on block

printing, boutique, doll making, wood and leather designing and tailoring.

Now the yearly turnover of the shop is around Tk 6 lakh and last year Neepa opened a second outlet in Aziz supermarket. She also produces products to supply several corporate buyers.

Her efforts have gained recognition. "Ideas" received three times the yearly award given by BSCIC in best design and young entrepreneur category in 1997, 1998 and 2001.

Such awards have been hard earned. Neepa has to open her gift shop at 11 o'clock in the morning and shuts

down at 9 at night, hardly managing time for lunch. And there have been serious setbacks, with theft and false orders causing heavy losses.

"But if you have strong determination and are honest to your dreams, you'll overcome any kind of hurdle," said Neepa with conviction.

Neepa described her shop as a family venture, rather than a small enterprise, where the entire family with her father (died last year), mother, sister (now reside in Germany) and two brothers are involved.

Yet despite the involvement of the entire family, Neepa and her sister Laila remain the key people looking after things, from designs to manufacture. Now at least 10 persons are employed in the business, with more working on contracts.

On the much-talked-about failure of banks in Bangladesh to lend to women entrepreneurs Neepa is relaxed. Earlier this week the government moved to appoint women to the boards of the nationalised commercial banks in an effort to ease the loan process for businesswomen.

Neepa said she was more focused on building her business steadily rather than raising funds through borrowing.

"Receiving bank loans fixes you to a chain, that could violate the flexibility of my life. Anyway apart from that getting loan is not that easy," she said.

Neepa's next project is to export her handicrafts. Soon perhaps New York or London will get the idea.

sayedaa@thedailystar.net

COMPANY PROFILE

Golfers help swing exports on course

JASIM UDDIN KHAN

When you look closely at some of the world's professional golfers it's not only their clothes that may be manufactured in Bangladesh.

For stars ranging from Vijay Singh, Phil Mikelson and John Daly have been playing and winning, using golf clubs whose shafts are made in a factory in Chittagong.

Since 1990 Japanese owned Mamiya-Op has been

turning out millions of golf shafts each year and now supplies leading global sorting brands such as Nike, Ping, UST and Wilson.

"Professional golfers are eager to pay a higher price for Mamiya golf shafts than for other shafts due to their quality and suitability," Ashish Chakraborty, assistant general manager and company secretary said.

According to Ashish, it has been proven that a Mamiya-

Op produced shaft can help score better than any other shaft brand produced in USA or Europe.

The company now employs around 600 mainly women workers, producing around 2 million golf shafts every year. The fully export oriented industry depends mostly on imported raw materials and earns around US\$ 15 million per year.

However packaging and some processing materials are

purchased locally.

Ashish said the company had prospered, despite tough price competition from Chinese companies winning orders on quality. "In fact our price is higher than that made in China or Thailand," Ashish said.

Part of the key to success is design. "Our shaft follows a wave shaped design. This smoothes the load and increases flex and torque characteristics. This is not possible with the usual shafts," he said.

Ashish claims Mamiya supplies about ten percent of the world market for golf shafts.

Prices for the product depend on materials used. Lighter shafts are made using graphite and carbon and these are good for driving clubs. While heavier shafts made using steel are good for putters.

He said the company has plans to set up a new unit in Chittagong to manufacture hockey shafts and tent poles.

Ashish said if the political

situation of the country remains stable, and if the lead times for importing and exporting improved, the company would start working on the new unit very soon.

One cloud on the horizon however is the rapid increase in the cost of living for workers that could translate into higher wages and undermine the low cost of manufacturing in the country, he added.

Jasim@thedailystar.net



Vijay Singh uses a club with a shaft made in Bangladesh..



A shaft making plant in Chittagong



so does Phil Mikelson



Golf shafts made in Bangladesh