

International Business News

Microsoft says mulling new Yahoo deal, without a takeover

AFP, Washington

Microsoft said Sunday it was considering some kind of new deal with Yahoo that would not involve a new takeover bid, two weeks after withdrawing its offer to acquire the struggling Internet pioneer.

"In light of developments since the withdrawal of the Microsoft proposal to acquire Yahoo Inc., Microsoft announced that it is continuing to explore and pursue its alternatives to improve and expand its online services and advertising business," a statement posted on its website said.

"Microsoft is considering and has raised with Yahoo an alternative that would involve a transaction with Yahoo but not an acquisition of all of Yahoo."

"Microsoft is not proposing to make a new bid to acquire all of Yahoo at this time, but reserves the right to reconsider that alternative depending on future developments and discussions."

It said there was no guarantee the talks would lead to a transaction.

Japan urged to open up to foreign investment

AFP, Tokyo

An advisory panel called on Japan's government Monday to help remove barriers to foreign investment amid calls overseas for the world's second-largest economy to open up more.

The panel of academics, business chiefs and other experts proposed Japan treat foreign and domestic investors equally and lower its corporate tax of around 40 percent, the highest among the world's major industrial nations.

"Japan lags far behind in foreign direct investment in the midst of intensifying global competition," said Chiba University of Commerce president Haruo Shimada, who heads the panel.

"We must take drastic steps," he told a news conference.

The proposals, along with others on rules for mergers and acquisitions and investment restrictions, will be submitted to the government on Tuesday as it prepares to work out basic economic and fiscal policies.

Philippines to try and harness sea currents for energy

AFP, Manila

The Philippines will try to generate electricity from sea currents under a project funded by an Italian grant, an official said Monday.

A turbine on a barge would be moored in the Tanon Strait to see if the currents there could be used to power streetlights in a Cebu town, said Science and Technology Undersecretary Graciano Yumul.

The barge would lie between the central waters of the islands of Cebu and Negros and the project would hopefully generate 50-100 kilowatts of electricity, Yumul added.

The 80-million-peso (1.9-million-dollar) grant from the Italian government will be used to buy the turbine from an Italian firm specialising in experimental technology.

Yumul hoped that the project, to be installed late this year, would help the Philippines in its quest to develop environmentally friendly energy sources that lessen dependence on expensive imported fuel.



Indonesian police drag a student (C) out of others to detain him during an anti-government demonstration in Jakarta yesterday. Students took to the streets to protest against a government plan to raise the price of fuel.

Nissan says moving into higher gear on electric cars

AFP, Tokyo

Nissan Motor Co., playing catch-up in fuel-efficient motoring, said Monday that it and NEC Corp. will invest 115 million dollars to mass produce new batteries for electric, hybrid and fuel-cell vehicles.

The push into advanced lithium-ion batteries comes as Japanese automakers invest in an array of new environmentally friendly car technologies amid soaring prices at the pump.

Nissan has been slower than rivals Toyota Motor Corp. and Honda Motor Co. to embrace petrol-electric hybrids, but it aims to become the industry leader in electric vehicles.

"Our vision for a more sustainable future is clear," said Nissan's executive vice president Carlos Tavares. "Nissan firmly believes the ultimate solution for sustainable mobility lies in zero emission."

COMPLIANCE

RMG factory drama brings workers' issues to life

REFAYET ULLAH MIRDHA

On the production floors of the Mohammadi Fashions Limited, a concern of Mohammadi Group, and the Irish Fashion garment factories in Dhaka, traditional dancers twist and shimmy in front of a crowd of workers preparing for their lunch break.

As more and more workers stop to watch, the show changes with the folk dancers giving way to a group of drama students playing out a scene from factory life.

A male worker, trying to work at his machine, has to sprint to the toilet repeatedly clutching his stomach. He has drunk contaminated water from the washroom the day before and is now suffering the consequences.

As the drama unfolds it becomes clear that the factory has provided clean drinking water on each floor, however the workers either do not know, or are too frightened, to use the facilities on offer.

In an industry where working conditions and compliance issues are increasingly in the spotlight the drama students from the Theatre Department of Jahangirnagar University leave little doubt among their enthralled audience of the importance of getting, and using clean water.

It is one of several dramas organised by DaNi Resource Center (DRC), a group working with social audit and compliances issues in the garment sector. The group's aim is to find a more effective way to teach workers rights and responsibilities, as well as good habits such as hygiene.

According to Daly Halder,



Artists perform a drama staged at a garment factory to make workers aware of compliance issues at their plant.

DRC's chief executive, traditional methods of getting such messages across normally fail. Active in the social auditing field for several years, she noticed that classroom sessions took up too much time and did not hold the workers' attention, while books and leaflets went unread.

DRC's idea is to disseminate the information in a way that will grab the workers' attention, a method known as infotainment.

"Workers always work under pressure and stress. Education or training through drama gives them some relaxation and enjoyment while at the same time communicating key messages," Daly Halder said.

The show at the Mohammadi Group and Irish Fashion garment factories

lasts less than 30 minutes. Other performances cover issues such as recruitment, leave, maternity benefits, health, grievance procedures, wages, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), Workers Welfare Committee (WWC), overtime and fire safety.

Factory owners can ask for additional subjects to be addressed that are topical for each factory or particularly

relevant, as it is the factory that pays for the show.

When Halder set up her company in 2006 it was a struggle to get factory owners interested, especially at a time when a wave of labour unrest was sweeping the garment industry.

However she persevered and received the backing of the International Finance Corporation's South Asia

Enterprise Development Facility (IFC-SEDF). As well as providing some financial support, IFC-SEDF helped open doors to industry leaders, paving the way for the acceptance of DRC's work.

Mrinal Sircar, sector development coordinator of IFC-SEDF, said, "We helped on how to reach the owners easily and effectively. Partly we are trying to create empathy among the owners about the workers through staging the drama."

And the response has been positive. Badius Salam, executive director of Ananta Garments Limited, an export-oriented woven garment factory with 5000 workers in Ashulia, has used DRC in his factory.

"The drama was a very effective way to convey compliance issues compared with those we had used previously," said Badius Salam, whose factory supplies international buyers such as GAP and Wal-Mart.

"Previously the issues seemed very complicated but the use of drama made it much easier for the employees to become aware of the issues," he said.

"We may stage more such dramas in future," he added.

According to Daly Halder, by last week DRC had performed the drama in 60 different factories, communicating key compliance messages to over 18,000 garment workers. DRC charges between Tk25,000 - Tk30,000 per show. In the future Daly plans to increase the number of performances and to make a 30-minute film for television.

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COLUMN

SYED NASIM MANZUR

Mind your language

Global English is an 8-year old company with about 100 employees, revenues of USD 20-30 million and profitable. Their business: teaching English to employees of multinationals using unique online methods. What is fascinating is the growth of its business in India, which has traditionally been regarded as endowed with a large English speaking human resource base. But as Mr. Desai the CEO put it: "People need to learn how to converse in different situations", so its more than just the language.

Global English model is a brilliant entrepreneurial response to a new business reality: the importance of communication and specifically English in today's global business world. Even as record number of foreigners sign up for Mandarin lessons, "global English" is the true lingua franca of today. Often as we pronounce Bangladesh the next investment Eldorado, we glibly proclaim how our colonial legacy has left us with the inherent advantage of English language skills. But the reality, as most employers know, is that the standard of communication skills and English in particular amongst job seekers is generally very poor. In less than a generation we have gone from national public universities and colleges that produced students who spoke English and Bengali correctly, to the abysmal situation today where we have teachers who lack the requisite training and skills themselves. I am amazed dur-

ing interviews where highly 'qualified' applicants insist on speaking in English that is so fundamentally wrong that one would not know where to start to correct them? Often the Bengali is equally flawed.

Now before I am crucified for being an Anglophile/ neo-colonialist I would like to submit the following facts:

□ English is the official language of the European Central Bank and of the ASEAN trade group, although in both cases the number of people speaking English as a first language among the member countries is minimal.

□ 70 percent of the content on the internet is in English but only 41 percent of the users are native English speakers.

□ English is the de-facto working language of 98 percent of German research physicists.

So if the French, Italians, Japanese and Germans (almost as passionate about their languages as Bengalis) can dispassionately accept the reality of English, maybe so should we?

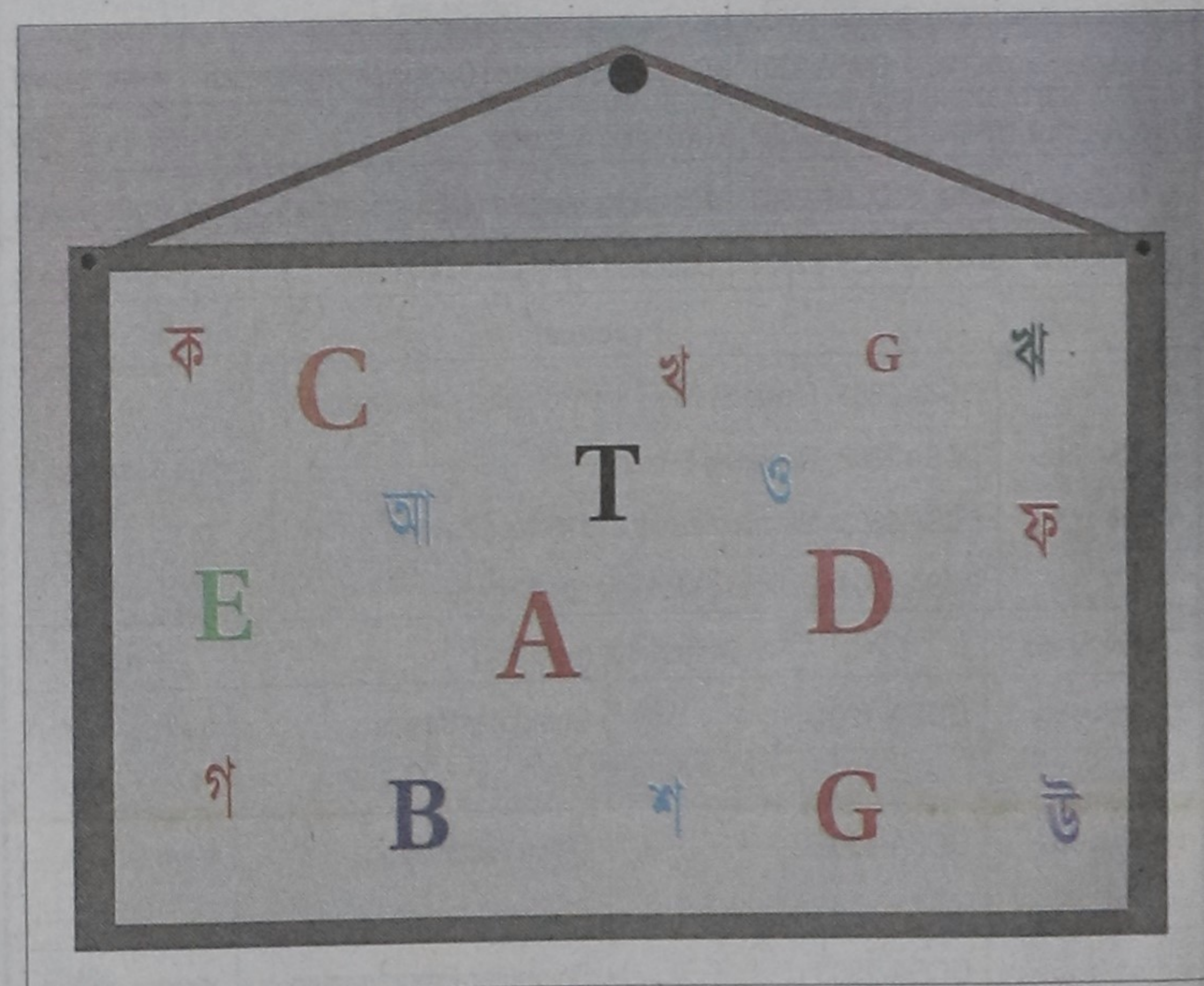
The crime was committed by some of our leaders who tried to earn populist support by abolishing English as official medium of instruction and downgrading its importance for decades. Whilst violently berating the private schools that came up to fill this void, they of course sent all their own children to English medium schools, here and abroad. Some of our fin-

est institutions with rich traditions of English teaching were ruined during this time. English has been reintroduced in the national school curriculum, but the damage is done. Whole generations have been denied their fair chance to acquire English proficiency, a basic skill for a global worker today.

What do a Keralite Nurse, a Danish mariner and a Sri Lankan maid have in common? They are all highly desirable in the job market, and one major reason is English. Even a populist leader like Laloo Prasad Yadav, Indian Minister for Railways, today demands teaching of English in schools.

In the UK, Government, Industry and Unions have joined to invest in workplace English language skills, especially amongst new immigrants needed by the economy. Listen to John Cridland, Deputy Director of the CBI: "The business benefits of investing in the language skills of the workforce are clear, many firms have seen improvement in productivity, savings in recruitment, lower turnover and higher employee motivation". This, in India and UK, where on average, English levels are slightly higher than ours.

English is spoken today by more than 300 million native speakers and 400-800 million non native speakers. It is the official language for air transport, shipping, science and technology, computers and



commerce, a medium of education, publishing and international negotiations.

As the Bangladesh economy gets more plugged into the global economy, communication skills have become critical for success. Without English, too much is lost in translation. Whether we are communicating with buyers, suppliers or employers, for now, we are getting by. But we could leverage ourselves so much better, if we had better communication and English

language skills. Just by providing basic English skills to our workers going abroad we could greatly enhance their competitiveness.

The usual suspects who moan that increased emphasis on English will somehow weaken or diminish our own language and culture, hugely underestimate Bangla. Our language is vibrant and dynamic and sustained by great minds using their creativity. Strong communication skills in English and

Bangla are not mutually exclusive, indeed both are critical for success. Only then can we get our own story out to the world.

One needs only to listen to the new Bangla music today to realize that English may be our window to the world, but Bangla will always be the window to our soul.

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