Toys from wheat straw bring shine to women

STAR

Women make children's toys from wheat straw under a project of Rishilpi, a local nongovernmental organisation, in Satkhira.

ABU AHMED, *from Satkhira*

The utilisation of left-out wheat straw in making handicrafts has changed the lives of some poor women in Binerpota village under Sadar upazila in Satkhira district.

It created an ample scope to fetch a huge amount of foreign currency for the country every year from the exports of this non-traditional item, according to people close to an income-generating project here.

The exports of this item earned over Tk 2 crore last year. USA, Canada, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy and other European countries are the main buyers of this handicraft, said Hasan Mahmud, assistant director of Rishilpi, a local non-governmental organisation that took up the project turning the destitute women into a skilled manpower.

Over 2,500 under-privileged women, who had been jobless previously, are involved in the art of making handicrafts from wheat straw. Their daily income ranges from around Tk 150 to Tk 200.

Mahmud seeks government patronisation to make this handicraft industry a foreign currency earner.

Rishilpi, run by Enzo Falcone and Laura Melano -- two Italians -- has not only created employment opportunities for the destitute but also for earning a huge amount of foreign currencies, the beneficiaries of the NGO's project say.

The NGO mobilised the distressed rural women and trained them on how to make beautiful handicrafts from dry wheat straw.

Initially, Rishilpi selected 10 women to train them. Widows, women from landless and erosion-hit families, the disabled, wives having poor and ailing husbands and the ones having no access to any kind of loan either from government or any NGO were chosen for the project.

The women are making handicrafts from the wheat straw supplied by Rishilpi, either at its factory or at their houses.

They produce different toys like tiger, spotted deer, peacock and monkey and indigenous besides pictures of traditional culture and scenic beauty of Bangladesh, which enhances country's image abroad. Their demand is increasing day by day at home and abroad.

The authorities of Arong, Karupalli, Heed Handicrafts at Dhaka and other organisations of across the country are the buyers of these items, according to the project officials.

The items are attractive in design and colour, said Rafiqul Islam, a supervisor of the project.

Handicraft artist Sufiya Khatun, 42, of village Shalley in Sadar upazila said the project has made a workable woman.

"My three children are now going to school which was a dream to me before joining the project. I am grateful to Rishilpi", said Sharifa Khatun, 40, of village Taltala in Sadar upazila.

Malina Das, 35, a divorced housewife of village Shalle in Sadar upazila said, "I have been doing this job for the last 10 years. I am better off now, with my son Shubha reading in class VIII at Taltala High School".

Rishilpi Director Enzo Falcone, who is the pioneer of the project for the distressed women, said, "It is our satisfaction that we are able to turn the ultra poor into skilled women workers."

Former policymakers advise on allowing undisclosed money

UNB, *Dhaka*

Former economic policymakers at a meeting yesterday with Finance Minister AMA Muhith advised him to allow undisclosed money, if necessary, through making way for investment in low-return bonds.

They urged the government not to ask about the source of money if the black money holders invest in the bonds like 5-year tenure, said a meeting source.

Former finance ministers and advisers, former secretaries of finance, ERD and IRD, and former Bangladesh Bank governors were present at the meeting in Dhaka.

Former finance minister M Sayeduzzaman, former finance advisers Dr Mirza Azizul Islam and Dr Akbar Ali Khan were present among others.

Former finance minister M Saifur Rahman and former finance adviser Shoeb Ahmed could not attend the meeting on health ground.

Muhith invited them in the wake of a critical situation arising out of the world economic recession to share their experiences and to seek suggestion on how to overcome the impacts of the recession, meeting sources said.

They said the former policymakers shared their experience about the budget for the next fiscal year against the backdrop of the recession, stressing the need for increasing internal resources through widening the tax net.

"The interest rates can be brought down to 5 or 6 percent from 10 to 12 percent," Muhith told a private television channel (Channel-i) after the meeting. "It's a new, interesting suggestion ...We can take it as one of the possible ways," he said about the suggestion of whitening black money.

He said government was thinking on how the undisclosed money could be brought to the mainstream economy amid recent demands from various business groups. "We've not taken any decision in this regard yet."

About the national budget, Muhith said the meeting viewed that the finance minister has "nothing to play" with the national budget as 80 percent of the expenditures go to meet the salary, repayment of loans with interest and social safety net programmes.

"All of them emphasised how the tax revenue can be increased as the expenditures are going up day by day," he said.

The finance minister said the Bangladesh Bank governor, NBR chairman and secretaries of Finance, ERD and IRD were present at the "social gathering" and took note of the suggestions that came up at the meeting.

"It's a sort of menu... it would facilitate us to pick ones suitably," he added.

Elite Paint Group gets new CEO

STAR BUSINESS DESK

BB Saha Roy has recently taken over as the managing director and chief executive officer (CEO) of Elite Paint Group of Companies, according to a press statement.

Prior to joining the Elite Group, he was the general manager (supply chain) of Berger Paints Bangladesh Ltd.

Roy, an MSc in Chemistry from Dhaka University and an MBA from Institute of Business Administration (IBA), is also the general secretary of Bangladesh Paint Manufacturers Association.

Fantasy Kingdom celebrates 7th anniversary

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Fantasy Kingdom, one of the largest amusement parks in the country, celebrated its seventh anniversary on the park premises in Ashulia, Dhaka on Friday.

Talukdar Mohammad Towhid Jung Murad, a lawmaker, inaugurated the ceremony as chief guest.

Concord Entertainment Co Lt, a concern of Concord Group and the owning company of the theme park, marked the event with fireworks and musical shows for visitors.

Chairman of Concord Group SM Kamaluddin, Senior Executive Director of Concord Entertainment Rashid Ahmed and other senior officials were present on the occasion.

WB urges the rich to help poor

UNB, *Brussels*

World Bank President Robert Zoellick yesterday said donor nations could raise up to $15 billion if they used just one percent of their multibillion economic stimulus plans for new aid to help poorer countries.

Zoellick said the money could be used for food programmes, road building or increasing crop growth in the developing world amid the threat of dwindling aid because of the financial crisis.

The WB chief is pushing the idea ahead of a gathering of Group of 20 industrialised country leaders in London on April 2.

Zoellick, speaking at a trans-Atlantic think-tank conference, said the global economic crisis is hitting developing countries hard, resulting in higher child mortality and increased poverty.

Nigeria oil unions launch strike next week

AFP, *Abuja*

Nigeria's oil workers said Saturday they will begin a three-day warning strike on Wednesday to protest a plan to remove a subsidy on petroleum products and the growing insecurity in the Niger Delta.

"The leadership of both NUPENG and PENGASSAN decided to launch the three-day warning strike from March 25 at the end of a 21-day ultimatum," union spokesman Bayo Olowosile told AFP.

Olowosile, who is general secretary of the powerful white-collar Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN), said the federal government had failed to address the unions' demands.

China to restructure auto industry

AFP, *Beijing*

China said Saturday it wanted to boost its auto industry by reducing the number of major carmakers through mergers, and promoting two or three companies as the dominant players in the sector.

The government's plans for reform of the industry came two months after it approved stimulus measures including tax cuts and subsidies to help carmakers survive the global economic downturn.

The State Council, or cabinet, said in a statement on its website dated late Friday that it wanted by 2011 to cut from 14 to 10 the number of major domestic automakers, who are responsible for 90 percent of domestic sales and output.

Under the scheme, two or three companies would be capable of producing more than two million units a year, while four or five others would have annual output capacity of one million units.

China, which beat the United States as the world's largest car market for a second consecutive month in February, wants to churn out 10 million vehicles in 2009, and has set a target of a 10 percent rise in annual output for 2009-2011.

PRAGATI

Saiful Islam, vice chairman of Navana Group, and MM Monirul Alam Tapan, assistant managing director of Pragati Life Insurance Ltd, exchange documents after signing a deal on Wednesday. Under the agreement, the insurer will provide group life and health insurance coverage to the staff of Navana.

In France, motor crisis drives everyone down

AFP, *Sochaux, France*

The Peugeot factory's metal-stamping presses boomed loudly, but car worker Laurent Roziak welcomed the noise after six days of empty silence from the latest work stoppage.

"It's demoralising when the machines aren't running. I prefer noise," said Roziak, who has been working for France's biggest carmaker at its flagship Sochaux plant for the past 20 years.

The 12,000 workers at Sochaux in eastern France -- the country's biggest factory -- were told to stay home last week after a strike at one of its suppliers crippled production.

The shutdown followed several stoppages this year and a long stretch of three weeks without work in December that has driven home the full impact of the global downturn in a region that is to France what Detroit is to the US car industry.

But the French government, in making crisis loans of 3.0 billion euros (4.1 billion dollars) to PSA Peugeot Citroen and Renault, extracted undertakings that the two groups would not close French factories or cut French jobs.

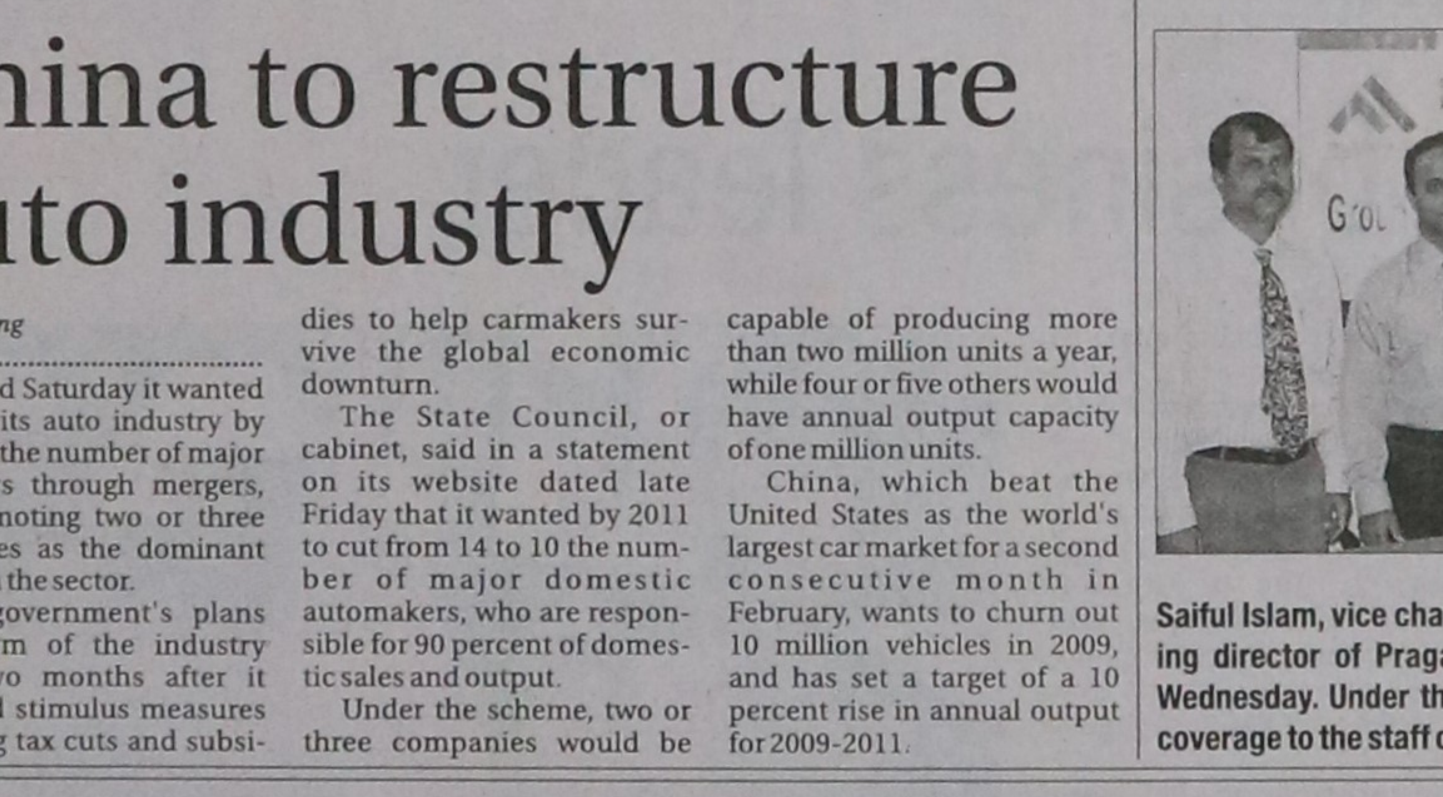
President Nicolas Sarkozy also signalled that some work now carried out in eastern Europe should be switched to France, provoking controversy that this was protectionist.

On Friday, Junior Industry Minister Luc Chatel said that Renault was switching a production line from Slovenia to France, creating 400 jobs near Paris.

However, despite the state rescue help, France's carmakers are struggling as the economic crisis slams the brakes on sales, rattling a sector that indirectly employs 10 percent of the nation's workforce.

"We are wondering whether or not it's going to pick up," said David Sciaux, 37, who returned to the Peugeot assembly line in Sochaux this week. "It's the first time that we have been off work for so long."

PSA Peugeot Citroen, Europe's second-biggest carmaker, expects car sales to drop by 20 percent this year and has announced plans along with fellow French carmaker Renault to slash thousands of jobs.



WWW.CARFORUMS.NET

The picture shows a French-made car: Peugeot. The 12,000 workers at Sochaux in eastern France -- the country's biggest factory -- were told to stay home last week after a strike at one of its suppliers crippled production.

The company whose lion logo is prominently displayed at the local town museum last year announced its first losses in 10 years.

Founded a century ago by Peugeot brothers Jean-Pierre and Jean Frederic, the Sochaux factory has long been the region's economic lifeblood, with an estimated 65,000 jobs linked to its production.

A sprawling maze of buildings connected by kilometres of roads and railways, the factory sits near the centre of the town, a stone's throw from the theatre and sports stadium, both built by Peugeot.

"It's a well known fact. When Peugeot coughs, the entire region catches a cold," said local union leader Pascal Pavillard.

So far, 1,000 temporary workers at the Sochaux plant have been told their contracts will not be renewed and negotiations are under way for the voluntary departure of 150 middle-management staff.

When Peugeot decides to halt production, workers who stay home are still paid their full salaries under union contracts that allow for vacation days and other time-off to be used.

Employees of the car giant's many suppliers aren't so lucky: they get half their wages paid by the state.

Pavillard said Peugeot had already served notice during contract talks that it could not continue paying full wages to non-productive employees much longer.

The plan is to use the downtime for job training and also to encourage transfers of employees to other Peugeot plants in France, he said.

With some 1,000 cars rolling off its assembly lines daily, the Sochaux plant is still on track to launch production on two new affordable family cars this year.

The gamble is that when 2010 rolls around, the plant will be well positioned to take advantage of a much hoped-for upswing in the economy, said Peugeot spokesman Jean-Charles Lefebvre.

In the meantime, a drastic cost-cutting programme is in full throttle at the factory where managers are scaling back on everything from paper supplies to non-essential maintenance work.

Beyond the plant's gated entrances, the ripple effects are devastating.

Cafe owner Francine Jacob said she has suffered a bruising loss of business after scores of sub-contractors stopped flocking to the plant and she was recently forced to let go two of her five employees.

"I'm not optimistic. I think we will have a hard time recovering from this," said Jacob.