

International Business News

India drafts list of 25 state firms for stake sales

AFP, New Delhi

India has prepared a preliminary list of 25 public sector companies it could float on the stock market as it seeks to accelerate state asset sales, a report said Wednesday.

Among the firms are Nuclear Power Corp of India, the National Bank for Agriculture and UTI Asset Management, which is India's oldest mutual fund, according to the Indian Express.

"This is not an exhaustive list and more companies could be added," the newspaper quoted an unnamed government official as saying.

The government announced last month it would float all profitable publicly owned companies and that 10 percent of all listed state-run firms must be publicly traded.

It has said it may sell stakes in at least 60 publicly owned companies but set no time-frame.

"I don't want to indicate a time that might help speculators. The object is to get the maximum price, not to do charity," Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee told parliament Tuesday.

Vijay Kelkar, head of a government financial panel, has estimated the total market value of public sector companies at 300-400 billion dollars.

GM CEO resigns as board demands faster turnaround

AP, Detroit

The leader of the new General Motors was done in by an old problem at the nation's largest car maker: Change wasn't happening fast enough.

GM's board and CEO Fritz Henderson parted ways Tuesday, the board upset that the automaker's turnaround wasn't moving more swiftly and Henderson frustrated with second-guessing, two people close to the former CEO said.

Board Chairman Ed Whitacre Jr., the former head of AT&T Inc., will take over as CEO while a global search is conducted.

It was unclear whether Henderson or the board moved first in the surprise resignation, which came just hours before Henderson was to be the high-profile keynote speaker at the Los Angeles Auto Show. At a hastily called news conference at General Motors Co.'s downtown Detroit headquarters, Whitacre would not answer questions, but said the board and Henderson agreed that he should step down.

Whitacre thanked Henderson, 51, a lifelong GM employee, for his leadership and said the company is on the right path toward offering high-quality cars and trucks worldwide.



World Bank President Robert Zoellick (L) chats with Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) Director General Chandrajit Banerjee at a business meeting with CEOs of the CII in New Delhi yesterday. Zoellick is on a four-day visit to understand how the World Bank Group can help the subcontinent meet its infrastructure and human development needs.

Expats in Asia see living costs surge on weak dollar

AFP, Singapore

Expatriates in key Asian cities are feeling the squeeze from the weak US dollar, which has pushed up their daily living expenses, a survey showed Wednesday.

From grocery shopping to restaurant meals, expatriates have seen their purchasing power shrink as the greenback continues to slide, human resources consultancy ECA International said in its twice-yearly cost of living report.

The report found foreigners living in Japan were the hardest hit in Asia given the current strength of the yen.

"A lot of locations whose currencies are not pegged against the US dollar ... have risen in our (cost) rankings over the course of the last 12 months," said Lee Quane, ECA International's regional director based in Hong Kong.

Those who have moved to places such as Japan, Singapore, Indonesia and South Korea will require higher cost of living allowances in order to maintain the same purchasing power they had last year, he told AFP.

Portugal lends 1.06b euros to IMF

AFP, Washington

The IMF said Tuesday it had signed a borrowing agreement with Portugal for up to 1.06 billion euros (1.6 billion dollars) to bolster lending resources amid the global economic crisis.

The International Monetary Fund said the agreement with Banco de Portugal, the central bank of Portugal, "is part of a commitment made by the European Union in March 2009 to contribute up to 75 billion euros to support the IMF's lending capacity."

The 27-nation EU in September committed an additional 50 billion euros to the fund's expanded New Arrangements to Borrow (NAB) lending scheme, aimed at boosting lending to member countries struggling with the downturn and balance of payments strains.

WTO MEETING

Doha talks end inconclusive



Activists protest in front of World Trade Organisation (WTO) headquarters during a WTO ministerial conference on Tuesday in Geneva.

AFP, Geneva

Trade ministers were wrapping up three days of WTO talks on Wednesday with little headway seen on ending an eight-year stalemate on framing a trade liberalisation accord ahead of a 2010 deadline.

Parties appeared unwilling to budge on the level of cuts to agriculture subsidies and industrial product tariffs which caused the impasse between developed and emerging nations in the Doha round of global trade talks.

Officials said that no landmark proposals were made to bring the process forward, including from the United States and India, blamed for the failure of the July 2008 talks over a disagreement on subsidy protection for poor Indian farmers.

US Trade Representative Ron Kirk and Indian Commerce Minister Anand Sharma met at least twice at the sidelines of the Geneva meeting, with the US

envoy calling on trade-driven developing nations to open up their markets as vital for conclusion of the Doha round.

India, Brazil and others in the Group of 20 developing countries which act as a big negotiating block primarily on agriculture have called for a spring ministerial meeting next year to give a final push to negotiations.

The United States has not flatly rejected the idea.

But Kirk said, "There is a little bit of a rush to say we've got to have this meeting by this date because we've set something, rather than focusing on really putting the time and the attention into the sustained bilateral negotiations that can yield real meaningful market access."

"We'd rather spend our time on that."

The Doha Round began in 2001 with a focus on dismantling obstacles to trade for poor nations by striking an accord that will cut agriculture subsidies and tariffs on

industrial goods. Deadlines to conclude the talks have been missed several times.

Discussions have been dogged by disagreements over issues including how much the US and the European Union should reduce aid to their farmers and the extent to which developing countries such as India, China and South Africa should lower tariffs.

"The UK is disappointed that WTO members have not yet been able to take the final steps to agree an outline (Doha) deal," said Gareth Thomas, British Trade Minister.

"If we don't make progress soon, we will miss our 2010 target and that would be a great loss for the global economy and the world's poorest," he said, in a reminder of the target date set by the leaders of the Group of 20 emerging and developed economies.

A successful Doha outcome would boost the global economy

by around 170 billion dollars annually, some estimates show.

Trade is being seen as critical to helping the global economy recover from the worst recession in decades.

World Trade Organisation (WTO) chief Pascal Lamy has warned ministers that time was not on their side even though about 80 percent of the Doha deal had been clinched.

Meanwhile, bilateral pacts to free trade outside of the WTO are being forged with countries with strong growth potential and large domestic markets.

Japanese trade minister Masayuki Naoshima warned that less developed countries tend to be left behind by the trade agreements outside of the Doha deal.

"The days of only nice statements should be over," said EU Agriculture Commissioner Mariann Fischer Boel, calling nations to be straightforward as they attempt to narrow their differences.

Developing states agree on tariff-cut deal

AFP, Geneva

Twenty-two developing and poor countries, including emerging giants India and Brazil, on Wednesday agreed on a deal on cutting tariffs on the sidelines of a World Trade Organisation meeting.

"This is a very important step in south-south cooperation," said Jorge Taiana, Argentinian Foreign Minister, who chaired the group.

Under the deal, the countries agreed on cutting tariffs by at least 20 percent on 70 percent of all products.

The UN Conference on Trade and Development's chief Supachai Panitchpakdi estimated that the tariff cut would bring "at least 8 billion dollars more trade for these countries."

The deal would affect only trade among the 22 and is not connected to the broader Doha round of negotiations that aim for a global reduction in trade barriers.

Taiana noted that the deal also shows that "developing countries have the will and capability to reach an agreement" and that the stalemate at the Doha Round of negotiations was "not a problem on our side."

Countries participating in the agreement include Algeria, Chile, Cuba, Egypt, India, Iran, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico, MERCOSUR (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay), Morocco, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Vietnam and Zimbabwe.

TECHNOLOGY

Robo-chefs, fashion-bots buzz Tokyo

AFP, Tokyo

Forget the Transformers and Astroboy: Japan's latest robots don't save the world -- they cook snacks, play with your kids, model clothes, and search for disaster victims.

In a nation that takes its humanoids seriously, the International Robot Exhibition kicked off this week, showing off the latest whirling and buzzing inventions from 192 companies and 64 organisations from at home and abroad.

Many of the cutting-edge machines on show are eye-popping, but industrial robot "Motoman" also put on a mouth-watering performance, deftly flipping a Japanese savoury pancake called okonomiyaki on a sizzling hotplate.

"It is delicious. Please enjoy," said the human-size creation of Yaskawa Electric Corp. in a robotic voice.

For pure dexterity, an artificial hand called the "H-type" was hard to beat -- a robotic hand with a sufficiently deft touch to handle a piece of pound cake without dropping a single crumb.

"This robot hand can pick up food without crushing it, which has been a hurdle for metal arms," said Jun Honda of robot developer Denso Wave.

Denso used small air pumps and a smooth silicon skin for the artificial limb, co-developed with software maker Squs, and says the device may one day be used to help the sick and elderly.

"It could be used to serve food for people who need care," Honda said.

Also aimed at helping people is the snake-shaped "Active Scope Camera", which uses robotic tech-

nology to slither serpent-style through the rubble of a disaster zone to take and transmit live video images.

Tohoku University and the International Rescue System Institute jointly developed the instrument, which propels itself forward with thousands of tiny devices called cilia that resemble the legs on a centipede.

Elsewhere, Eager Co. showed off a curvaceous female-shaped humanoid made of layers of cardboard, billed as the first eco-friendly robot.

The maker hopes the figure, with its soundless, smooth and almost seductive movements could find a job as a display window mannequin -- or even on a theatre stage.

"We want to apply this very lightweight robot as a new advertising medium," said Eager's Tsuyoshi Yamashita. "The smooth movements of the robot would help female customers feel safe and have an affinity with the machine."

A robot of the cuter variety is Ropid, 38 centimetres (15 inches) tall, with huge round eyes and boxy arms and legs -- more at home in a toy department than on a factory floor.

Unlike the super-advanced industrial robots elsewhere in the exhibition, this one keeps things simple. It can stand up, walk, run and jump -- but in a loveable way, its creator hopes.

"The challenge is to design a robot in a way to make you believe that you can communicate with it," said its creator, Tomotaka Takahashi. "With his quick actions, he looks like he's really alive."



Tomotaka Takahashi with his "Ropid" robot.