

International Business News

Indian inflation nears double figures

AFP, Mumbai
India said Monday inflation rose to near double figures as roaring economic growth sent prices higher, fuelling expectations that the central bank will raise rates next month.

Prices of fuel, rubber, plastic and cement all jumped during February, as the economy accelerated out of last year's global downturn, led by a strong recovery in the industrial sector.

Annual inflation as measured by the wholesale price index, or WPI, rose to a 16-month high of 9.89 percent in February from 8.56 percent in January.

Food prices rocketed 17.79 percent after the country's worst monsoon in nearly four decades last year, raising pressure on the government, which has been under attack from the opposition over the rising cost of living.

Experts said inflation could jump further for next month.

India's chief economic advisor to the finance ministry, Kaushik Basu, said he did not rule out inflation crossing into double digits next month.

"The rate should start easing from April-May onwards," Basu told reporters in New Delhi on Monday.

The headline figure was seen by analysts as making an increase in key interest rates by the central bank extremely likely, possibly by as much as 50 basis points, when it holds its next scheduled meeting on April 20.

Chinese automaker BYD plans massive expansion

AFP, Hong Kong
Chinese automaker BYD Co. said Monday it had massive expansion plans this year and would consider building a plant in the United States, a day after announcing annual profits had tripled.

The company, which has the backing of American billionaire Warren Buffett, said it will put aside 10 billion yuan (1.5 billion US dollars) this year to grow its business, including plans for two new mainland Chinese car plants.

Wang Chuanfu, BYD's chairman and reportedly China's richest man, told a news conference Monday the firm is also on track to launch its e6 electric car in the US in the second half of the year, Dow Jones Newswires reported.

He also kept open the possibility of setting up a car plant in the United States where hard-hit automakers are struggling to recover from declining sales caused by the global downturn.

The company planned to open a US sales office in the second half of the year, Wang said, according to a company spokeswoman. "(And) if there is a market, we will not exclude the chance to set up a production plant in the United States," Wang added.

Late Sunday, Hong Kong-listed BYD, which is 10 percent owned by a unit of Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway investment giant, said 2009 profit was 3.79 billion yuan from 1.02 billion yuan the year before, due to strong China sales.

Japan may ease visa rules for foreign nurses, dentists

AFP, Tokyo
Japan may lift work visa restrictions for foreign nurses and dentists, to help care for its fast-ageing and shrinking population, the government said Monday.

The immigration bureau is considering a plan to abolish visa limits for hundreds of nurses from the Philippines and Indonesia that currently restrict them to working in Japan for only seven years.

A bureau official said it may also soon invite nurses from other countries.

The changes may come as early as this month and as soon as the bureau formally endorses a new five-year policy plan, the official said.

"We are considering abolishing the limitation," he said. "As we are facing an era with a shrinking population, it is important to accept fresh blood from other Asian countries, which are growing rapidly."

Japan may also lift a six-year work limit for foreign dentists after it already did so for overseas medical doctors in 2006, to ease a shortage, said the official.

Japan's population fell by about 75,000 in 2009, the biggest drop since World War II, while the country had a record 28.98 million people aged 65 or over last year, according to latest government data.



Board members of the new "CHAdeMO" association (far left to right) Fuji Heavy Industries Vice President Akira Mabuchi, Mitsubishi Motors President Osamu Masuko, Tokyo Electric Power Company Chairman Tsunehisa Katsumata, Japanese Vice Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry Teruhiko Mashiko, Nissan Motor Chief Operating Officer Toshiyuki Shiga and Toyota Motor Executive Koei Saga join hands at a general meeting to establish the association in Tokyo yesterday. More than 100 business entities, including automakers, electric power companies and electric makers are part of the association to standardise a quick charging system for electric vehicles.

ARCHITECTURE

A career for future

KAWSAR KHAN
It was immediately after the independence of Bangladesh that Architect Mubasshar Hussain completed his studies in architecture.

At that time, one of his relatives was also preparing to construct a building. With the zeal of a young professional, Hussain proposed that he make the architectural plan for the building. He offered the service free of cost, but the response was more than stringent than he imagined.

"I will build the house on my own land, with my own money, and it is I who will live in the house. Then why should you design it," Hussain, now president of the Institute of Architects Bangladesh (IAB), quoted his relative. The Buet graduate was describing the situation architects generally faced at that time.

Those days are over. Architects now work under tremendous pressure. Experienced architects will often have to say no to fresh work orders due to workload, Hussain said in a recent interview at the IAB office in Dhaka.

Architects say the country experienced a boom in real estate in the last few years mainly because of continuous economic growth, remittance inflow, business and export, which resulted in increased work orders for architects.

Consequently, the demand for institutions that teach architecture has also increased over the years.

In the 70s, only the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet) offered postgraduate studies in architecture. But now, at least 10 schools, including three public universities, offer the course to meet the growing need for building planners.

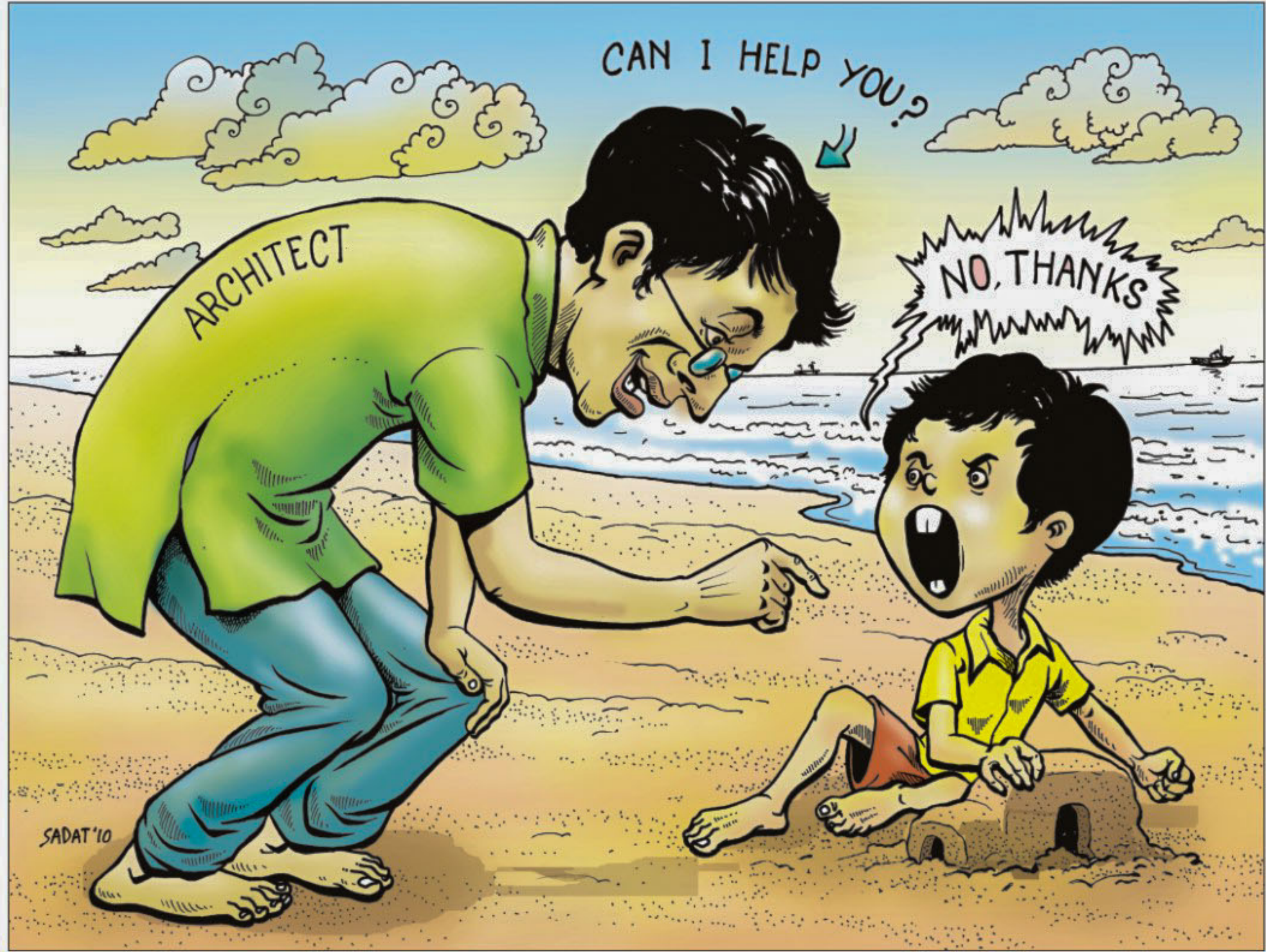
According to sector insiders, over 350 dedicated architectural firms are operational currently, while there was only a handful in the post independence period. Besides, some real estate firms also have separate architectural units to feed their projects.

"We set up an architectural firm -- Nirnoy Upodesta Ltd -- to meet the needs of our company," said Tanveerul Haq Probal, managing director of Building for Future and president of Real Estate and Housing Association of Bangladesh (REHAB).

He found the growing importance of such firms as an indication of rising professionalism in the construction sector.

"Gone are the days when one designed their own office," said Hussain.

Mamnoon Murshed Chowdhury, owner of DWM4 Architects, said architectural firms have mushroomed not only in Dhaka,



but also in Chittagong and Sylhet, as construction work is also expanding fast in those areas.

At present, people are engaging architects not only for residential and commercial buildings, but also to build factories. This trend has developed, as people are now conscious that a building could be well planned and attractive at the same time, with the help of an architect, Chowdhury said.

Architect Shah Fuad M Cyrus, owner of architectural firm Mason Consultants, said modern structures are becoming more complicated and larger by the day. Keeping pace with the requirements of these structures, the pressure on professionals is also mounting.

Architecture has multiple roles to play in constructing a well-planned structure that is comfortable to live in and also makes the best use of scarce urban land.

"At the same time, an architect has to make the best use of the natural environment, like receiving the most wind flow and

avoiding the heat of summer," Cyrus said.

IAB is the sole platform of building designers in the country, which now has over 1,800 active members. Any graduate with an architectural background is required to be a member of the platform to begin professional work. To gain membership, an architect has to pass an exam held by IAB.

Some say the IAB examinations are easier than the same at other developed countries.

Professionals said it is easy to set up an architectural firm, as it is mainly vigorous brainwork. Good architects prefer to set up separate architectural firms instead of working with others.

"Due to this reason, consultancy fees for architects have reduced significantly that, in some cases, compromised on the quality of work," said Chowdhury.

Architect Mustapha Khalid Palash, managing director of Vistaara Architects, said several new arenas have emerged in architecture, including fire fighting, earthquake

tackling and use of the natural environment, which were not very important in the past.

"Architects have to tackle the issues to make the city safe, sustainable and beautiful," he said.

Professionals said in the past, designs prepared by architects were often violated, as there were no government laws in this regard. But now, any constructor or developer needs to take the permission of the architect and government to make changes to the plan.

"This law ensures that no one violates the original plan submitted to the authorities to get permission to construct a building," Chowdhury added.

According to Dhaka city development authority Rajdhani Unnayan Kartipokkho, 22,500 building plans were passed by the organisation since 2007, while the number of permanent structures in the city is 225,000.

kawsar@thedailystar.net

MIGRATION

Singapore narrows door for foreign workers

AFP, Singapore
Construction workers from Bangladesh, hotel staff from the Philippines, waitresses from China, shipyard welders from Myanmar, technology professionals from India -- Singapore has them all.

For years the rich but worker-starved city-state, built by mainly Chinese immigrants, had rolled out the welcome mat for foreigners, whose numbers rose drastically during the economic boom from 2004-2007.

But with one in three of the five million people living on the tiny island now a foreigner and citizens complaining about competition for jobs, housing and medical care, the government is taking a fresh look at its open-door policy.

With the grumbling getting louder and general elections expected to be called before they are due in 2012, the government has unveiled measures to reduce reliance on foreigners and assure citizens they remain the priority.

"There are social and physical limits to how many more we can absorb," Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam told parliament in February.

He said the government will make it costlier for companies to hire foreigners by raising the levies they must pay for every non-Singaporean or non-resident they hire.

The government also earmarked 5.5 billion Singapore dollars (3.9 billion US) over the next five years to upgrade Singaporean workers' skills to boost their productivity, make them more competitive and raise incomes.

It imposed measures to cool down rising home prices, also blamed on foreigners buying into the property market, and pledged it will further tighten the process of accepting permanent residents and new citizens.

Of Singapore's population of nearly five million last year, 533,200 were permanent residents and 1.25 million were foreigners on employment passes, along with their families, official statistics show.

"I think it is shaping up to be one of the hottest issues in Singapore today," political commentator Seah Chiang Nee told AFP.

Economist Song Seng Wun of CIMB-GK Research said that apart from helping local companies rise up the value chain, the new



The photo taken on January 20, 2009 shows foreign labourers working at a construction site in Singapore. With one in three of the five million people living on the tiny island now a foreigner and citizens complaining about competition for jobs, housing and medical care, the government is taking a fresh look at its open-door policy.

measures will also address potential election issues.

Singapore's last elections, held in 2006, saw the ruling People's Action Party returned to power for six years, continuing its uninterrupted rule over the island since 1959.

"The government has to be seen doing something in areas that are potential flashpoints," Song said.

Disenchantment over foreign workers gained momentum during a severe economic slump that began in the third quarter of 2008, when trade-reliant Singapore became the first Asian economy to slip into recession.

Drastic job and salary cuts were implemented, affecting many white-collar workers.

In coffee shops, Internet forums, letters to newspapers and sessions with members of parliament, citizens became more vocal about the rapidly growing numbers of for-

eigners in their ranks.

The most common complaint is that Singaporeans are losing jobs to foreigners who are willing to accept much lower salaries.

"Foreigners are a damn pain in the butt. I seriously wonder if they are here to work or just snatch jobs from our locals," said one posting on the popular online forum sammyboy.com.

"The country is fast becoming an unfamiliar place to many Singaporeans. The sense of national pride is disappearing by the day," said a posting by Nur Muhammad on The Online Citizen.

Seah, who runs the political website www.littlespeck.com, said much of the resentment comes from Singaporeans who have to compete directly with foreign engineers, accountants, hotel managers and IT professionals.

"Most Singaporeans do not feel angry against low-skilled foreign workers... It is more aimed at those who come in as white collar workers and get the jobs that Singaporeans can do," he said.

Citizens have also complained about having to share space in crowded trains with a large number of foreigners, or compete with them for places in government schools and public housing.

Foreign labourers are accused of loitering, spitting in public and leaving litter behind. Another sore point for locals is dealing with waitresses and sales people who can hardly understand English.

Some employers have argued they do not hire Singaporeans for certain jobs because locals are choosy and often lack the natural social and communication skills in service professions like manning hotel front desks.