

Stocks	
DGEN	0.04% 5,596.86
CSCX	0.11% 10,634.68

Currencies		
	Buy Tk	Sell Tk
USD	68.62	69.62
EUR	90.54	96.17
GBP	102.31	108.12
JPY	0.71	0.76

SOURCE: STANDARD CHARTERED BANK

Fair brings farm tech

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

An agriculture technology fair -- AgriTECH Bangladesh-2010 -- started in Dhaka yesterday to introduce the latest farming machinery.

The three-day fair at Dhaka Sheraton Hotel presents an opportunity for entrepreneurs who are willing to change traditional farming processes by adopting new technology.

Some 30 companies are showcasing agricultural machinery and equipment, solar pumps, agro chemicals, seeds processing machines, food processing and packaging equipment, technology for horticulture and services at the fair.

Agri-tech makers from Bangladesh, India and Korea are participating in the fair, which was inaugurated by Fisheries and Livestock Minister Abdul Latif Biswas.

The adaptation of technology began in the farm sector in the 1990s, overtaking traditional farming with cows and buffaloes and manual irrigation methods.

"We want to show our hidden contribution in Bangladesh's agriculture sector that has become tech-loving," said Jasim Uddin, an executive of RS Machineries, importer and distributor of diesel engine and power tiller spare parts.

About 67 percent of 76 lakh hectares of arable lands are irrigated by mechanised means. Power tillers and tractors till nearly 70 percent of the 13.74 million hectares of total cropland, analysts said.

With progress in threshing, almost all maize is shelled by machine and, in the case of rice, threshing by machine is about 50 percent, agronomists said.

Such growing use of technology in the sector encouraged foreign equipment makers to knock the farming market here.

"We are coming to Bangladesh for the first time to explore the market," said K Ramu, marketing manager of Promech Industries, an Indian farm tech maker.

InGen Technology Ltd is optimistic about introducing solar-based irrigation pumps soon.



RASHED SHUMON

A solar pump jets water into artificial grasses at an agriculture technology fair that started at Dhaka Sheraton Hotel yesterday. Around 30 companies are showcasing latest farming machinery and technology in the three-day event, AgriTECH Bangladesh-2010. ExpoNet, an exhibition management company, in association with Agricultural Machinery Manufacturers Association organised the show.

Prepaid tickets for bus travellers

JASIM UDDIN KHAN

City commuters will get prepaid bus tickets this month as the transport sector is adopting new technology.

N-Wave Co Bd Ltd, a subsidiary of a Japanese company, will offer prepaid tickets to Suchana Associates Bus Company that runs around 60 buses on Uttara-Azimpur route a day.

Six other private bus operators also plan to introduce the latest ticketing system.

Customers can use the prepaid integrated circuit card (IC card) any time for selected bus routes, said Technical Manager of the company Mohammad Ashraf Uddin.

IC cards will function like swipe cards on reader machines installed either on buses or at common ticket

shops at different stops.

The digital ticketing will ease commuters' hassles in collecting tickets from counters because the beneficiaries of the system can travel by prepaid card.

For the bus companies, benefits are expected to be more, as the digital ticketing will enable them to reduce pilferages and irregularities, such as anomalies in cash handling and issuance of fake tickets.

Operators will also be able to ensure transparency in fare collections and accuracy in accounts.

N-Wave Co Bd Ltd will first introduce 1,000 cards for the route where the manual ticketing system will also continue. The company carried out a month-long mock operation of such ticketing and received a good response from customers.

It also signed an agreement with Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation (BRTC) to introduce the card to five BRTC routes from next month. The BRTC has brought 100 new buses for these routes where the IC cards will be on offer.

The company has already installed around 17 such IC card booths for the Uttara-Azimpur route, and will install another 100 for the five BRTC routes.

Trans Silva, Moitree Paribahan Company, Kolmilata Transport Company, Mega City Bus Company, Mega City Passengers Service (One Line) and Rajdhani Express also plan to adopt the new technology.

N-Wave, a Japan-based software development firm, invested the whole amount for the company as Japanese investment, said

Shahjahan Ali, managing director of the company.

N-Wave developed software for the Bangladesh project, while Japan External Trade Organisation supported the company with technical assistance, Ali said.

The company, engaged in software and web development, software consulting and backing up customers, recently requested duty exemption from the government for importing cards and machinery from Japan.

Earlier last year, the operators had demanded that the government allocate spaces near different stoppages to set up stations for introducing digital tickets, which they said would benefit both the commuters and owners.

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Question over move to cut BTRC's power

MD HASAN

The government's move to empower the telecoms ministry has raised a string of questions, as experts say such a shift in power will clip the regulator's authority.

The ministry is apparently unaware of many complexities in the industry, they said.

The cabinet approved amendments to Bangladesh Telecommunication (Amendment) Act 2010 and International Long Distance Telecommunications Services (ILDTS) Policy 2010 last week.

Telecom ministry officials said if the amendments get through parliament, the ministry will have the authority to issue and renew licences, approve services and fix the telecom operators' proposed tariff for the market.

The move to give the ministry more clout comes at a time when the country

is poised for a leap in the booming information and communication technology sector.

There are a lot of ICT activities around and many more to come. Worldwide interoperability for microwave access, international gateway, international connection exchange, international internet gateway and voice over internet protocol are already in place, and third generation technology is ready for a debut.

And experts have questioned the ministry's ability to handle all these.

"The telecoms ministry will inherit hundreds of licences and frequencies that the regulator has granted by far. The second generation (2G) mobile licences are due for renewal and the issuance of third generation (3G) mobile licences is overdue. But merely signing and stamping a paper doesn't make the licences effective," said Abu Saeed Khan, senior policy fellow of LIRNEasia, a regional

ICT policy and regulation think-tank.

"Appropriate radio frequencies are to be assigned simultaneously. The ministry is naturally clueless about such complexity," Khan added.

The Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) was established in 2001 and the independent commission started its function as the regulator in 2002 and issues all types of telecoms and ICT-related licences.

The commission is also responsible for monitoring the activities of the telecoms operators and guides them to follow the telecoms rules.

The telecoms ministry officials said BTRC will process the licensing activities and the ministry will give the final approval to the operators -- in line with the amended laws and policies. Officials close to the matter said the ministry did not consult the BTRC about the amendments.

All telecoms operators now need to

have BTRC approval for their tariff plan renewals for the market, but the ministry will handle the issue if the amendments come into effect.

Industry insiders questioned how the telecom ministry will handle the licence and tariff matters, which are complicated in the highly competitive market.

"The ministry's lack of knowledge on retail pricing will delay the tariff approval of all telecoms and ICT services. As a result, the tariff war will be diminished and consumers will be deprived of benefits from fierce competition. It will hamper the new as well as the incumbent smaller operators' business," said Khan.

The ministry officials sit on the boards of state-owned mobile phone, fixed phone and international gateway, he said, adding that the ministry's neutrality as a regulator will remain questionable. "It will make the investors shy."

A senior official of a telecom operator said: "There are several complaints about BTRC's role as a regulator. But globally, operators feel free to talk to a regulator than a government top body, such as the ministry."

He said the government should further strengthen the BTRC, as it already has a good set-up to regulate the market.

BTRC Chairman Zia Ahmed said: "We are not yet aware of the amendments. But we believe the government motive is good."

"We have no idea about the changes. But we hope everything will happen in a transparent way," said Zakiul Islam, president of Association of Mobile Telecom Operators of Bangladesh.

Telecoms Secretary Sunil Kanti Bose, however, said: "It's not the right time to discuss the details of the amendments. Several steps need to be taken to shape the amendments." hasan@thedailystar.net

Benapole port to be automated

A CORRESPONDENT, Benapole

Benapole Port and Customs House is going to be brought under automation to make it modern and effective.

A daylong automation workshop, jointly organised by the International Finance Corporation (IFC) and National Board of Revenue (NBR), was held at Benapole Customs Club yesterday.

This is the first time a land port is being brought under automation. Benapole Customs Commissioner Dr Abdul Mannan Shikder presided over the workshop.

Energy secretary for gas price hike

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Gas prices need to be increased to develop the country's energy sector, acting Energy and Mineral Resources Secretary Mohammad Mejbahuddin said yesterday in Dhaka.

Gas prices in Bangladesh are much lower compared to those in India, Pakistan and Thailand, he said.

Mejbahuddin urged the media to play a proactive role in making people aware of the need to adjust the gas prices.

While addressing a "stakeholders' workshop on draft final report for communication strategy and campaign on gas and energy pricing and reform study", he said rationalising gas price can also help develop infrastructure of the energy sector.

Acting chairman of Petrobangla Ataul Haq Mollah said: "Appropriate gas pricing can help generate funds for oil and gas exploration."

JP Singh, consultant group team leader of India-based Vision RI Connexion Private Limited, and Saiful Alam Chowdhury, director (Planning) of Petrobangla, also spoke.

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