

Software fair creates buzz

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The country's largest software and ICT-enabled services exposition -- BASIS SoftExpo -- started yesterday in Dhaka to bridge the gap between service providers and users.

Finance Minister AMA Muhith inaugurated the five-day event at Bangabandhu International Conference Centre (BICC). About 110 local companies and 10 firms from Denmark and Netherlands are participating in the ninth edition of the exposition themed "Digital Bangladesh in Action".

Bangladesh Association of Software and Information Services (BASIS), the national trade association of software and IT-enabled services industry, is organising the annual event in association with the Ministry of Science and Information and Communication Technology

and Access to Information (A2I) programme of the Prime Minister's Office.

BASIS President Mahboob Zaman, while chairing the inaugural ceremony at BICC, said the government should use public private partnership initiative in the ICT sector, which could be the main lifeline of the economy in next five to seven years.

He urged the government to set up an ICT authority and also demanded fund allocation.

The BASIS chief said the government should continue tax exemption facility for the ICT sector for at least another 10 years for the development of the sector, after the fiscal immunity expires this year.

Speaking as the chief guest, Muhith said among the government's programmes, the digital Bangladesh activity has advanced a lot.

He said although he is person-

ally against allowing tax exemption facility to any industry, the demand of the country's growing ICT sector would be considered while reviewing fiscal changes.

"All of us should make a habit of paying taxes. We are taking steps so that taxes are at tolerable level, and nobody gets into any trouble."

The finance minister said many industries that earlier enjoyed tax exemption facilities have been awarded with low taxes.

Muhith also said his government would also consider awarding dedicated funds for the sector.

Commerce Minister Faruk Khan said they hope the ICT sector would also emerge as a billion-dollar industry in future like apparel sector.

He requested the finance minister to take steps to connect Bangladesh with second submarine cable network, instead of relying on one, which regularly

witnesses troubles, creating disruptions.

Yeafesh Osman, state minister for science and information and communication technology, said there is no doubt that the ICT sector would outperform the garment industry.

"We have cut the price for bandwidth. We are trying to lower it further," he said, referring to 31 percent cut in bandwidth prices from Tk 17,400 to Tk 12,000 per Mbps last month.

Md Nazrul Islam Khan, national project director of A2I Programme, said the government has taken a raft of steps to take ICT services to the people.

He said: "We have already set up information services centres at union level. We have also completed the automation of district administration in Jessore, the first ever in the country."

"Within a year, all offices at

district levels will come under automation. We will also bring all upazilas under the automated system later," Khan said.

On the sidelines of the exposition, an IT job fair would also be organised, which aims to create employment opportunities for IT professionals with over 400 BASIS member companies. Face-to-Face interviews will be arranged at the Expo venue.

The event will also feature over 20 seminars on software and ICT related issues along with a number of competitions.

BASIS Secretary General Forkan Bin Kashem, its Senior Vice President AKM Fahim Mashroor and GPIT Chief Executive Kazi N Islam also spoke.

The exposition will remain open to visitors from 10am to 8pm everyday. The entry fee is Tk 30. Students, however, will enjoy free entry, organisers said.



MEGHNA GROUP

Cyclelife of Meghna Group won the best award in pavilion category in Dhaka International Trade Fair 2011 that concluded on January 31. Export Promotion Bureau organised the flagship annual event.

Seminar links CSR and PPP for social development

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Business leaders should incorporate social welfare activities into their corporate strategy to raise organisations' productivity and ensure social development, said a policy expert.

"We urge the private sector to integrate corporate social responsibility (CSR) issues into business strategy," said Anis Chowdhury, policy adviser at the Prime Minister's Office. "It will enhance productivity of the organisation through improving the surrounding environment."

Chowdhury was addressing a seminar on 'public-private partnership (PPP) and CSR for social development' at Hotel Sonargaon yesterday.

International Organisation for Migration (IOM) arranged the seminar in collaboration with the CSR Centre to discuss and develop a strategy for the economic and social empowerment of disadvantaged women.

Speaking as a special guest, Bangladesh Bank Governor Atiur Rahman said PPP can be a helpful vehicle to ensure social development because it offers the best possible solution to the government's aspirations to deliver some public services.

"Innovative ideas from both government bodies and private sector can place these two segments (PPP and CSR) on a strong platform to widen scope for social development to blossom," said Rahman.

The central bank is motivating all other banks to expand lending to the under-served sectors both as business case and CSR obligation which is expected to lead to more broad-based inclusive growth and reduce poverty, said the central bank governor.

"CSR programmes of businesses can go a long way in reducing deprivations and widening the access of rural and urban poor to basic social and financial services necessary for healthy, enlightened and productive life," he said.

IOM has initiated some PPP initiatives in the recent months for the economic empowerment of victims of trafficking and other vulnerable women.

"We have set up Kafe Mukti coffee shops in collaboration with Nestle, Transcom and BKMEA to employ human trafficking victims," said IOM's Regional Representative Rubab Fatema.

State Minister for Women and Children Affairs Dr Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury attended the session as the chief guest with CSR Centre Chairman and Bangladesh Enterprise Institute President Farooq

India demands full BlackBerry access

REUTERS, New Delhi/Islamabad

India rejected on Monday Research In Motion's (RIM) offer to allow it only partial access to its BlackBerry data services as neighbouring Pakistan also moved to restrict the popular smartphone's services.

It was not immediately clear what the Indian government, which says it is driven by security concerns, would now do after the Canadian smartphone maker failed to fulfill demands to monitor encrypted corporate email by a Jan. 31 deadline. RIM had previously said was confident India would not ban its services.

Earlier this month, RIM said it had given India the means to access its Messenger service ahead of the deadline but reiterated that it could not give the authorities access to monitor secure corporate emails.

Home (Interior) Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram told a news conference the government still wanted access to emails.

"I think a decision will be taken today by the MHA (Ministry of Home Affairs)," Chidambaram added. RIM's India-based spokesman was not immediately available for comment.

Last year, India demanded access to all BlackBerry services as part of efforts to fight militancy and security threats over the Internet and through telephone communications, demands echoed by several other countries that have also tried, sometimes successfully, to restrict the popular smartphone.

On Monday, India's neighbour Pakistan called on mobile phone operators to stop BlackBerry services to foreign missions amid concern about the secu-



Chairman of Eskayef Bangladesh Ltd Latifur Rahman, centre, attends the pharmaceutical company's annual conference 2010 at a hotel in Cox's Bazar yesterday. From left, General Manager (sales) Mir Mustafizur Rahman; directors Arshad Waliur Rahman, Shahzreh Huq, Simeen Hossain, Shahnaz Rahman, and Atiqur Rahman; General Manager (commercial) Md Mostafa Hassan, General Manager (marketing) Dr Mohammad Mujahidul Islam are also seen.

SKF

Activists call for trust building in RMG sector

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Rights activists and international buyers' representatives on Monday asked garment owners to create trust and confidence in their relationships with workers and employees to avert labour unrest in the factories.

Establishing healthy trade union activities at the factory level is a tested mechanism of building trust and confidence between the industry owners and employees, said President of Bangladesh Jatiya Sramik Jote Shirin Akhter at a roundtable on "Minimum Wage: Implementation Challenges and Way Forward."

"We want to introduce a healthy trade unionism at the factory level to establish the workers' rights through creating mutual trust and confidence," Shirin Akhter said.

Practising good trade unionist modes would also help create a skilled workforce for the garment sector, she said. She asked all stakeholders to form a joint monitoring committee to oversee the wage implementation at the factories.

"The government and owners

should introduce rationing of basic commodities including staples for the garment workers," she said.

Multistakeholder Forum Bangladesh (MFB) organised the roundtable at Bangabandhu International Conference Centre to discuss the workers' rights, garment businesses and progress of implementation of minimum wages which came into effect from November last year.

MFB is an offshoot of the international Multifibre Arrangement Forum (MFAF) founded in 2006. MFAF members from Bangladesh formed a national sub-group in Bangladesh.

MFB is working with an objective to overcome development obstacles, especially social, environmental and production standards related ones in the readymade garment industry and improve further, with the ultimate aim to enhance the social and productivity status of the industry, the product quality as well as employment conditions of workers.

At the roundtable, Basirunnabi, a representative of Swedish H and

M, remarked that the grading system introduced for determining the salaries of the garment workers was wrongly designed.

"The distinction between the skilled and the unskilled workers seems inconsequential because of the wrong grading system at the factories. As a result, the workers demonstrated," he said.

He also asked the owners to settle the issue of festival bonus through discussion with the workers. Suggesting yearly reviewing of the wages, he said many problems might be resolved through enhancing communication between the workers and the owners.

Lutful Kabir of German International Cooperation (GIZ) said the wages of the garment workers should have been increased earlier in view of the higher inflation in the country.

In the newly implemented wage structure, the grading system is not clear because it was not designed on the basis of workers' skills and experiences, he said.

Moreover, many workers do not know about his or her grade because they were neither consulted nor made fully aware of

the forthcoming changes in their salaries at the implementation stage, he added.

"In general, the productivity at the factory level in Bangladesh is 30 percent whereas we need it raised to at least 50 percent. We need to enhance the skills of the workers," he said.

Abdus Salam Murshedy, president of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), asked the buyers to offer fair prices while the international buyers place orders to purchase apparel items from Bangladesh.

The international brands present in Bangladesh should pay compensation to the workers for any casualties in the workplace because the buyers are the major beneficiaries of the hard work put in at the garment factories, he said.

"You [the buyers] should pay fair prices for Bangladeshi garment items because we are getting much less judging our costs of production," Murshedy said.

Israfil Alam MP, chairman of the standing committee of the Ministry of Labour and Employment, asked for introducing



BEPZA

S-A International has recently signed a deal with Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority (Bepza) for setting up a sweater manufacturing plant in Uttara EPZ. Md Moyjuddin Ahmed, member (investment promotion) of Bepza, and Siddiqui Alam, executive partner of S-A International, inked the deal at Bepza complex in Dhaka on Monday.



DHAKA BANK

Dhaka Bank officers pose at a daylong training workshop on "Online credit information bureau reporting" in the capital recently. Neaz Mohammad Khan, deputy managing director of the bank, attended the programme. Dhaka Bank Training Institute organised the training.