

Citi launches twin projects to help underprivileged children



Michael Zink, head of Asean and Citi country officer for Singapore, and Rashed Maqsood, Citi country officer for Bangladesh, pose at the launch of the bank's two projects for underprivileged children, at Sonargaon Hotel in the capital yesterday.

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

CITIBANK NA yesterday launched two community projects in the capital, aiming to improve the lives of about 800 underprivileged children.

Michael Zink, head of Asean and Citi country officer for Singapore, unveiled the projects at the city's Sonargaon Hotel, as part of the bank's corporate social responsibility endeavours.

For one of the projects, Citi Bangladesh has partnered with Underprivileged Children's Education Program (UCEP) to launch the Citi-UCEP Pre-technical Education Project.

The project will spend a \$30,000 fund to provide pre-tech education to 346 underprivileged children in the age group of 14 to 16 years for a

period of six months.

The children will gain financial literacy, practical mathematics and communicative English skills by the end of the course, which will be implemented in four schools in Dhaka.

Ubaidur Rob, chairman of UCEP, said the training will encourage the underprivileged students from the city's slums to go to vocational schools, where upon graduation they can expect to earn up to \$100 a month at home and \$500 abroad.

For the second project, Citi teamed with SEID Trust to provide education to some 450 underprivileged children with autism, intellectual disability and multiple disabilities.

The service will be provided at SEID Trust's four centres at Shyamoli, Rayerbazar,

Kamrangirchar and Hazaribagh.

Citi officials said that the bank would organise a rally on Manik Mia Avenue in the capital on October 6 to create awareness about the educational rights of underprivileged and challenged children.

A fundraising dinner will be organised by Citi on October 20, the proceeds of which would go to the SEID Trust.

Dilara Sattar Mitu, a director of SEID Trust, said welcomed Citi's support to her organisation.

"Initiatives such as ours require a huge amount of money to run. It is difficult to manage the SEID Trust alone as a voluntary development organisation."

Rashed Maqsood, Citi's country officer for Bangladesh, was also present at the ceremony.

Sheltech organises a 15-day fair to sell flats

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

SHELTECH (Pvt) Ltd, a real estate company, begins a 15-day promotional housing fair at its office in Dhaka today, eyeing higher apartment sales.

The company plans to sell more than 300 apartments ranging from 805-3140 square feet (sq ft) worth around Tk 500 crore during the fair.

Ten new projects consisting of 204 apartments located in Mirpur, Maghbazar, Baridhara, Uttara, Kamalapur and Banani, along with 100 flats from its ongoing projects in Dhaka, will be presented at the fair styled Autumn Fair 2012.

The realtor will offer up to 15 percent discount on bookings for each flat or land, along with a wide range of gifts such as LCD televisions, revealed the company's managing director (MD) Toufiq M Seraj at a press conference yesterday.

"We have designed our products targeting the middle- and upper middle-income bracket."

Apartments at the Baridhara will cost Tk 36,000 per sq ft, while at Uttara it will cost Tk 6,500 per sq ft, said Seraj, adding that the average cost will be Tk 8000 - Tk 10,000 per square foot at the other areas.

It means each flat with a size of 2,045 sq ft at Baridhara will cost around Tk 7.37 crore, and around Tk 52.32 lakh for an apartment size of 805 sq ft at Uttara.

He said Sheltech will hand over the projects within 2-3.5 years of the signing of the deal.

Seraj said Sheltech saw sales



Toufiq M Seraj, managing director of Sheltech (Pvt) Ltd, announces a 15-day housing fair at a press conference at Panthapath in Dhaka yesterday. Tanvir Ahmed, director for development, was also present. The fair begins today.

rebound from July of this year, and he expects the trend to continue into next year.

The real-estate sector now contributes up to 12-14 percent to the country's GDP, employing around one lakh skilled people and 35 lakh workforce in the linkage industries, according to Seraj.

The Sheltech MD said his company will mobilize the 25 projects it has in the pipeline -- to build 400 apartments at a total cost of Tk 500 crore -- by the end of this year.

Around 4,000 apartments have so far been handed over to customers since the company's inception in 1988, he added.

Seraj said the exorbitant land and construction material prices,

the higher interest rates and lack of new gas connection, account for the present high rates for flats.

He said one katha land (720 sq ft) at Gulshan cost Tk 2.5 crore in 2010; now, a katha sells at Tk 7 crore, and in case of Gulshan Avenue, it is as high as Tk 10 crore.

The realtors now have to pay 20-22 percent interest, which was single digit even a few years ago, said Seraj.

Adding to the realtors' woes is the freeze on new gas connections since July 21, 2009 to commercial consumers and July 13, 2010 to domestic users, due to gas shortage.

The fair will remain open from 9 am to 7pm every day and is free of any entry fee.

India car sales soar but where are the roads?

AFP, New Delhi

EVEN with its economy cooling, India's car sales are forecast to go into overdrive, creating a huge challenge for the government to modernise the country's antiquated road network.

The shift toward vehicle ownership in the country of 1.2 billion people has reached a tipping point, driven by increasingly urban, affluent and aspirational first-time buyers, according to global research firm LMC Automotive.

Many millions "are crossing the wealth threshold to the stage they can afford cars", said Pete Kelly, managing director of LMC Automotive UK, adding "short-term variations in economic growth aren't likely to get in the way".

LMC projected light vehicle sales -- cars, sport utility vehicles and light trucks -- will quadruple to 11 million units by 2020 from 2.7 million in 2010, in a paper presented at an automotive conference in New Delhi in September.

The forecast surge comes as global automakers have been betting big on Asia's third-largest economy, spending billions of dollars on plant investments, as they aim to offset saturated Western markets.

"The fundamentals are here, the potential is here -- we have to be here," John Chacko, chief India representative of Germany's Volkswagen Group, told AFP on the sidelines of the conference.

Right now, just 11 Indians per 1,000 own cars compared with more than 500 per 1,000 in the United States, according to the Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers.

"Buying a car is not just transport but a status symbol -- it shows your neighbours you've entered car-driving society. It's a



Cars ply Marine Drive in Mumbai. India's car sales are rising, but it has created a huge challenge for the government to modernise the country's antiquated roads.

sign you've arrived," Buvneesh Bedi, a sales executive at a Japanese showroom, told AFP.

But more cars pose big problems for India, which lacks a modern road and highway network and where air pollution in some cities is already sky-high.

Bullock carts, cows, bicycles and rickshaws frequently compete for space with hulking SUVs, cars and trucks on India's potholed streets and highways.

The traffic mayhem has given India the unenviable claim to having among the world's most dangerous roads. Some 135,500 people died in 2010 in road accidents and 527,500 were injured, according to latest government figure.

"Our cities were never built for a large number of cars," Sarbojit Pal, a fellow at India's Energy and Resources Institute, told AFP. "What's required is a lot more planning, a lot more investment from government and private players."

But India's abilities to meet the challenges are in doubt.

The government set a target in 2009 of building 20 kilometres (12 miles) of highways a day, but a parliamentary panel in March called the goal a "distant dream" with the pace of construction being just 10 kilometres.

"The National Highways Authority is not in a position to complete any project... within the scheduled period, although financing has not been an issue. It is adding project after project without achieving the targets," the panel said.

India last month opened a new six-lane, 165-kilometre highway halving travel time between New Delhi and Agra, home to the Taj Mahal -- the nation's famed monument to love. The project, however, took nine years to finish.

The government aims to spend nearly \$1 trillion to upgrade India's shabby roads, airports and ports and other infrastructure over the next five years.

A top priority should be creating more public transport, said Anumita Roychowdhury, execu-

tive director of India's Centre for Science and Environment.

"Even if people buy cars, they need other options to using them," she told AFP. "Otherwise, car growth will be unsustainable from a health, pollution level, traffic fumes and liveability aspect. Road congestion will be unbearable."

Even with worries mounting about India's "infrastructure deficit", car buyers are unlikely to be fazed by the bumpy road ahead, said Roychowdhury.

"We're at the take-off stage," she said.

Sunil Kumar, 24, is a typical first-time buyer.

Now a bank customer relations manager and about to marry, Kumar said he can finally afford to trade in his motorcycle for a small car -- India's hottest-selling segment that makes up 70 percent of the market.

"It's a great feeling to be able to buy a car," he said as he gripped the steering wheel of a shiny new hatchback in a Delhi auto showroom.

Green supercars lure crisis-hit consumers

REUTERS, Paris

EUROPEAN consumers have been buying far fewer cars in recent years; Fiat boss Sergio Marchionne says the auto companies "have lost three million (sales) in five years."

That poses an epic challenge for Europe's struggling carmakers: How to rekindle automotive lust in crisis-sated, climate-conscious consumers and lure them back to showrooms.

One not-so-obvious solution was on display this week at the Paris Auto show -- green supercars.

No one expects the average customer to shell out the 416,500-euro asking price for the new Mercedes-Benz SLS AMG Coupe Electric Drive, the "most exclusive and dynamic way to drive an electric car," according to the German luxury brand.

With a combined maximum output of 552 kW and a top speed of 250 km/h, the flagship performance model will likely be the fastest and most powerful production electric car on the road when it goes into extremely limited production in 2013.

Mercedes admits the battery-powered SLS is reserved for those lucky and affluent few who are "enthusiastic about ambitious high-tech solutions for the future of motoring."

But corporate parent Daimler

clearly believes the mere presence next year in Mercedes showrooms of the high-performance two-seater, with its signature gull wings and four powerful electric motors -- one for each wheel -- should attract curious shoppers who just might walk away instead with a new garden-variety A-, B- or C-Class.

NEW GENERATION

Rival BMW is thinking along the same lines. Its i8 plug-in hybrid, first shown as a styling concept at the 2009 Frankfurt show and reprised in Paris, has been described by the company as its "new-generation sports car". It is expected to cost well over 100,000 euros when it arrives at dealers in 2014.

So far BMW has shown several versions of the i8, including a four-passenger coupe and a two-passenger spider. The futuristic i8 features advanced electronic systems and extensive use of lightweight carbon fiber. Like Mercedes' SLS Electric, all four wheels on the BMW are driven, but with a 96kW electric motor powering the front axle and a 164kW turbo-charged three-cylinder gasoline engine at the rear. That's a fraction of the muscle supplied in the Mercedes, but given the i8's ultra-light weight, it's enough to propel the car from 0-100km/h in less than five seconds, while returning a frugal 2.7 litres per 100 kilometres.



The "Ale", an experimental high fuel efficiency car built by Fuelvapor Technologies Inc with builder George Parker of Vancouver, British Columbia, is displayed at the New York International Auto Show, March 20, 2008.