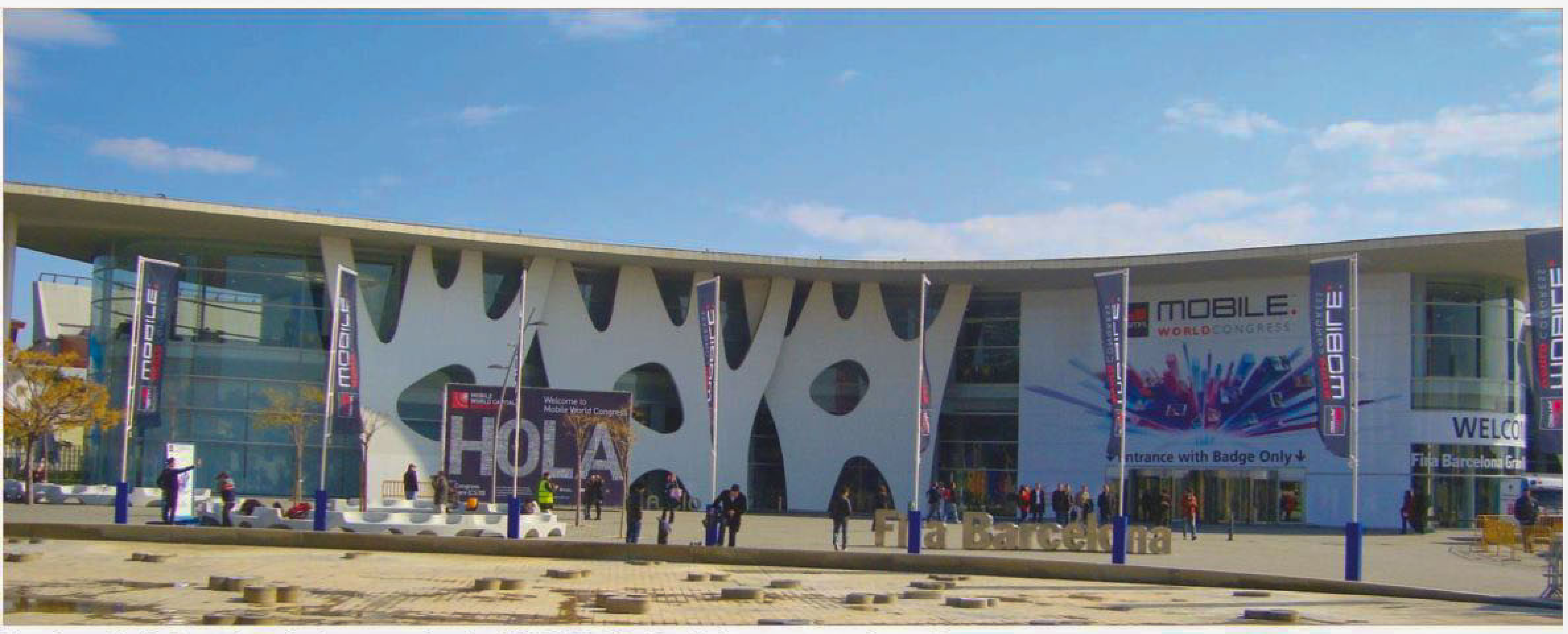


Fira Gran Via in Barcelona is the venue for the GSMA Mobile World Congress starting today.

Barcelona mobile fair opens today to discuss innovations, challenges

MD FAZLUR RAHMAN, *from Barcelona*

FOR stakeholders of the mobile phone ecosystem, all roads lead to Barcelona, where the four-day GSMA Mobile World Congress (MWC) kicks off today.

The exposition, which takes place at the Spanish city every year, becomes the window to next year in mobile devices and services.

This year's MWC, styled the New Mobile Horizon, will be no different, with an expected foot count of 70,000.

Starting from a cutting-edge product and technology exhibition featuring 1,500 unique exhibitors to the gathering of the mobile app community to learn, network and engage with innovators, the event is fully-geared to give a glimpse of the future of mobile technology.

"It is really a platform for the entire world to demonstrate both the current state of mobile and offer a vision of our connected future," said John Hoffman, chief executive of GSMA Ltd.

From Bangladesh, Telecoms Minister Shahara Khatun, along with top officials from the telecom ministry and Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission are due at the event.

"The growth of mobile penetration in Bangladesh is an example for the world," said Syed Tahmeed Azizul Huq, acting chief communications officer of Grameenphone.

"The world has many things to learn from us -- how we have progressed through the use of technology despite huge challenges."

"On the other hand, Bangladesh would be able to learn about what is going around the world in the field of mobile technology," he added.

Top executives from other mobile operators from Bangladesh, too, will be in attendance.

The MWC also includes a jamboree for marketers, advertisers and global brands to explore the possibilities in mobile marketing and provides the setting to seek industry opportunities, strike deals and network.

The event will start with a thought-leadership conference, where chief executives from some of the world's largest and most important operators will discuss the challenges and opportunities the future holds for the mobile industry, said an official of the organising body.

On Tuesday, the organisers will hand out the "GSMA Global Awards" to 32 mobile technology companies, in recognition of the advancements they have made in the industry and their achievements.

The GSMA will also showcase an integrated range of mobile Near Field Communication services throughout the venue and in Barcelona.

The Connected City will feature a range of mobile-connected products and services to demonstrate the Connected Life.

This year's MWC will be held at a new space -- Fira Gran Via -- which is double the size of the previous one.

Last year, 67,000 people attended the event, now in its eighth year.

fazlur.rahman@thedailystar.net

Apple, Samsung face onslaught

AFP, *Barcelona*

CHINESE handset makers will lead an onslaught on smartphone titans Samsung and Apple when the world's biggest mobile fair opens today in Barcelona, Spain.

Offering big-screen, slick, slim smartphones at lower prices, Chinese manufacturers Huawei, ZTE and Lenovo will leverage the Mobile World Congress to chip away at the mighty duopoly, analysts say.

The handset battle is part of a broader revolt against a handful of companies with a stranglehold on the booming industry's handsets, operating systems and microchips, they say.

Apple, as usual, is steering clear of the February 25-28 congress that draws 1,500 exhibitors to this Mediterranean city in northeastern Spain, and Samsung is not expected to launch its next big offer, the Galaxy S4, until some time after the show.

That may leave the field clear for rivals to tout their ambitions for a slice of the smartphone market, which is set to grow to a record one billion handset shipments in 2013 according to a forecast by global consultancy Deloitte.

"I think we will see challengers trying to make noise at the Mobile World Congress this year," said Ian Fogg, London-based senior mobile analyst at research house IHS.

New players face a daunting task, though.

Samsung and Apple accounted for more than half of all smartphone sales in the final quarter of 2012 -- 29.0 percent for Samsung and 22.1 percent for Apple -- according to research firm Strategy Analytics.

Behind Samsung and Apple, however, Chinese firms held the third, fourth and fifth spots -- with 5.3 percent for Huawei, 4.7 percent for ZTE and 4.4 percent for Lenovo.

Demand for smartphones in developing countries could give Chinese firms a bigger opening, said Magnus Rehle, senior partner at telecommunications management consultancy group Greenwich Consulting.

"Hundreds of millions of Africans and Indians and Asians want to have a smartphone and so far the blocking point has been the price," said Rehle, speaking from Ghana.

Now the Chinese firms were offering attractive smartphones at lower prices, he said.

"I think they will be quite successful in grabbing the new market outside of Europe and the US, and that is where the growth is," Rehle said.

An even mightier duopoly holds sway over the operating system software that makes the smartphones work.

Google's Android ran 69 percent of all handsets sold last year and Apple's iOS 22 percent, said a study by independent analytical house Canalys.

Yet they face challengers, too, including Mozilla's new open-sourced Firefox OS, backed by an array of mobile phone operators.

Microsoft's new Windows Mobile operating system is struggling, however.

"The number of apps that is available is one thing that is blocking Windows from being successful," Rehle said.

"They have had problems and everybody is hoping this will change because the duopoly is maybe not good for the market."

Firefox could face similar difficulties, he predicted.

A battle has broken out, too, over the processor chips that run the smartphones.

Myanmar, shining new hope for global oil giants

AFP, *Yangon*

WHILE other countries may be more reliable and better equipped, Myanmar has emerged as the new promised land for global oil and gas giants unperturbed by a lack of data on its proven energy reserves.

Since political reforms helped Myanmar shed its pariah status and prompted international sanctions to be lifted, the world's major energy firms have been eyeing the potentially oil-and-gas-rich country tucked between China and India.

Thai explorer PTTEP, EPI Holdings of Hong Kong, Swiss firm Geopetro International Holding and Petronas of Malaysia were among a slew of companies to strike exploration deals last June.

In September, French giant Total bought a 40 percent stake in an offshore exploration venture, soon followed by Australia's biggest energy firm Woodside -- while several American and European majors are reportedly poised to join in.

The surge in interest is set to continue following Myanmar's invitation for tenders for 18 onshore oil blocks last month, with offers for a further 50 or so offshore blocks pending.

Yangon will host an international conference for the sector in March, as the buzz over the country's hydrocarbon reserves intensifies -- even though very little is known about them.

"Due to the impact of economic sanctions on Myanmar for many years, there has been very limited recent investment," said Rajiv Biswas, Asia-Pacific Chief Economist for IHS Global Insight.

"Myanmar's oil and gas reserves have not been sufficiently explored using modern seismic technology, making it an exciting prospective exploration target."

Myanmar is one of the rare countries in the world that has not been fully surveyed and "there is huge interest in exploring what we call 'frontier basins'", said the spokesman of a foreign oil company.

"There is very little information. Prospects are wide open," he added, requesting anonymity.

The CIA estimates that Myanmar is sitting on some 50 million barrels of oil and some 283.2 billion cubic metres of natural gas.

On its webpage, the state-run Myanma Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE) cites a 2006 estimate of proven reserves, which stood at 226 million barrels of oil and 457 billions cubic meters of gas.

But sources interviewed by AFP admitted that there figures raised more questions than answers. The only widely agreed assumption is that offshore reserves are more promising than onshore, and gas probably supersedes oil.

Authorities "have been very cautious lately by not quoting any evaluation of discovered reserves or potential resources yet to be discovered," said Myo Tin, manager of the Myanmar Petroleum Exploration and Production Company Limited, which operates an oil field in the centre of the country.

Foreign firms must be encouraged to enter the sector, he said, citing the "technology intensive" nature of offshore sites that needs major firms "to transfer knowledge in exploration techniques, drilling and development".

More companies will also reduce the chance of oil giants monopolising territory, he said.

In fact, Myanmar has been keenly waiting for interest from the global petro-giants to materialise.

Over the last two decades, only Asian companies, led by the Chinese, have dared venture into a country demonised by the international community for its human rights violations.

The two Western groups with a long-term presence in Myanmar, Total and Chevron, entered before sanctions were imposed and then stood accused of serving the interests of the junta and closing their eyes to forced labour.

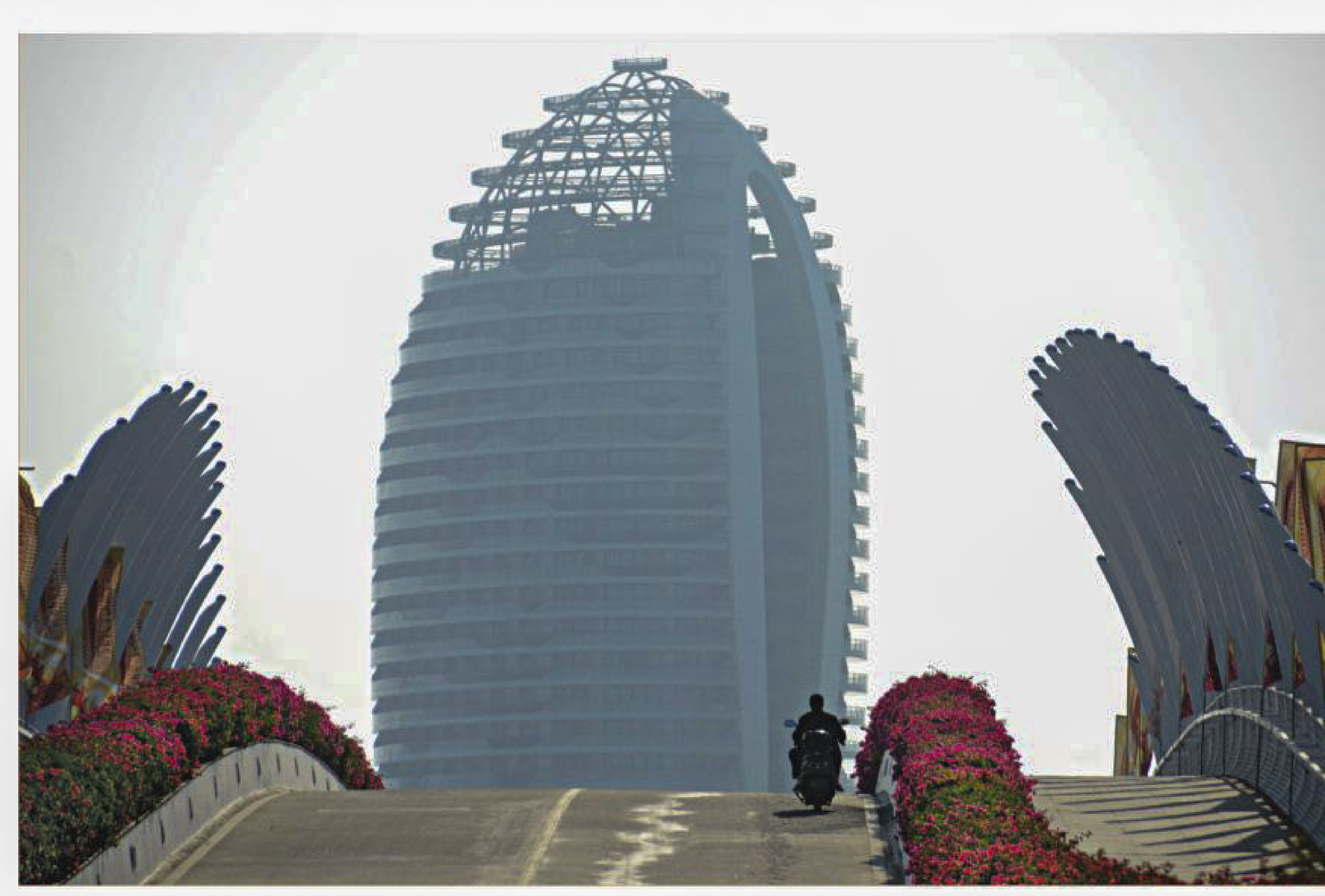
Today, however, political reforms have taken off and Burmese companies are jostling to offer partnership deals to foreigners.

This new mood owes much to Thein Sein, a former general turned reformist president, who has made it clear the time has arrived for transparency.

A tender offer in 2012 was reportedly delayed to meet international standards.

Chinese 'Dubai' turns into deserted island

AFP, *Sanya, China*



AFP

A man rides a motorcycle towards a luxury apartment complex in the seaside city of Sanya in China's southern Hainan province.

IT was billed as China's Dubai: a cluster of sail-shaped skyscrapers on a man made island surrounded by tropical sea, the epitome of an unprecedented property boom that transformed skylines across the country.

But prices on Phoenix Island, off the palm-tree lined streets of the resort city of Sanya, have plummeted in recent months, exposing the hidden fragilities of China's growing but sometimes unbalanced economy.

A "seven star" hotel is under construction on the wave-lapped oval, which the provincial tourism authority proclaims as a "fierce competitor" for the title of "eighth wonder of the modern world".

But the island stands quiet aside from a few orange-jacketed cleaning staff, with undisturbed seaside swimming pools reflecting rows of pristine white towers, and a row of Porsches one of the few signs of habitation.

Chinese manufacturers once snapped up its luxury apartments, but with profits falling as a result of the global downturn many owners need to offload properties urgently and raise cash to repay business loans, estate agents said.

Now apartments on Phoenix Island which reached the dizzying heights of 150,000 yuan per square metre ($2,200 per square foot) in 2010 are on offer for just 70,000 yuan, said Sun Zhe, a local estate agent.

"I just got a call from a businessman desperate to sell," Sun told AFP, brandishing his mobile phone as he whizzed over a bridge to the futuristic development on a electric golf cart.

"Whether it's toys or clothes, the export market is bad... property owners need capital quickly, and want to sell their apartments right away," he said. "They are really feeling the effect of the financial crisis."

Official figures showed an almost eight percent increase in China's total exports last year, but sales to Europe fell by almost four percent with the continent mired in a debt crisis and recession.

At the same time rising wages in China mean that producers of clothes, toys and other low-end goods are seeing their margins squeezed as other emerging economies compete to become the world's centre for cheap manufacturing.

For years Chinese business owners, faced with limited investment options and low returns from deposits in state-run banks, have used property as a store of value, pushing prices up even higher in the good times but creating the risk of a crash in the bad.

"China had a lending boom... and so if people are using property as a place to stash their cash, they had more cash to stash," said Patrick Chanovec, a professor at Beijing's Tsinghua university.

"At some point they want to get their money out, then you find out if there are really people who are willing to pay those high prices."

Phoenix Island is part of Hainan, a Belgium-sized province in the South China Sea that saw the biggest property price increases in China after a 2008 government stimulus flooded the economy with credit.

Eager buyers camped out in tents on city streets as prices shot up by more than 50 percent in one year.

But tightened policies on access to credit and multiple house purchases have since knocked values in favoured second home locations, even while prices in major cities they have rallied in recent months.

Real estate is a pillar of the Chinese economy, accounting for almost 14 percent of GDP last year and supporting the massive construction sector, making policy makers anxious to avoid a major collapse of the property bubble.

At the same time ordinary Chinese who cannot afford to buy a home have been frustrated by high housing costs for years.

With anger over graft also mounting state media have carried several reports in recent weeks about corrupt officials' property holdings, including a policeman who used a fake identity card to buy at least 192 dwellings.

Hainan's tropical shores are said to be a hotspot for purchases by well-connected bureaucrats, but estate agents denied they were rushing to sell off apartments for fear of a crackdown.

Officials only account for around 20 percent of owners, they said -- while doubting any new regulations would be properly enforced. "There are always different rules for people with connections," said one agent, asking to remain anonymous.

It is an example of the multiple competing interests the authorities have to balance, leaving them treading a difficult line, with sometimes unforeseen consequences.

On the other side of Hainan, the Seaview Auspicious Gardens, boasts beachside villas accessed by artificial rivers and a private library containing 100,000 books, prices have fallen by a third from a high of 12,000 yuan per square metre in the last year, and a third of the flats remain unsold.

Yang Qiong has a thankless task as one of its saleswomen.

"Before the government restrictions we would sell out a development like this in just five months," she lamented.