Dhaka Ahsania Mission leaps forward with a cancer hospital

Its president talks about their journey as the 15-storey hospital opens tomorrow

MD FAZLUR RAHMAN

DHAKA Ahsania Mission will take a giant step forward tomorrow in improving the quality of life of the country's disadvantaged people as it officially opens its hospital to treat both cancer and general patients.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will inaugurate Ahsania Mission Cancer and General Hospital in Uttara, Dhaka.

The 15-storey hospital is located over 6.5 bighas of land, providing 4.5 lakh square feet of space and is being constructed in three phases. The first phase has just been completed and it is already providing health care services.

The second phase of the 500-bed hospital is expected to be completed in July next year and the third phase in December 2016.

"Many thought the dream to build this hospital was too big to become a reality for a philanthropic organisation. But I never lost courage," said Kazi Rafiqul Alam, president of the mission, in an interview with The Daily Star on Monday.

"In Bangladesh, we have not seen such a major project built with money from the general people. I am grateful to all those who have kept faith on the mission."

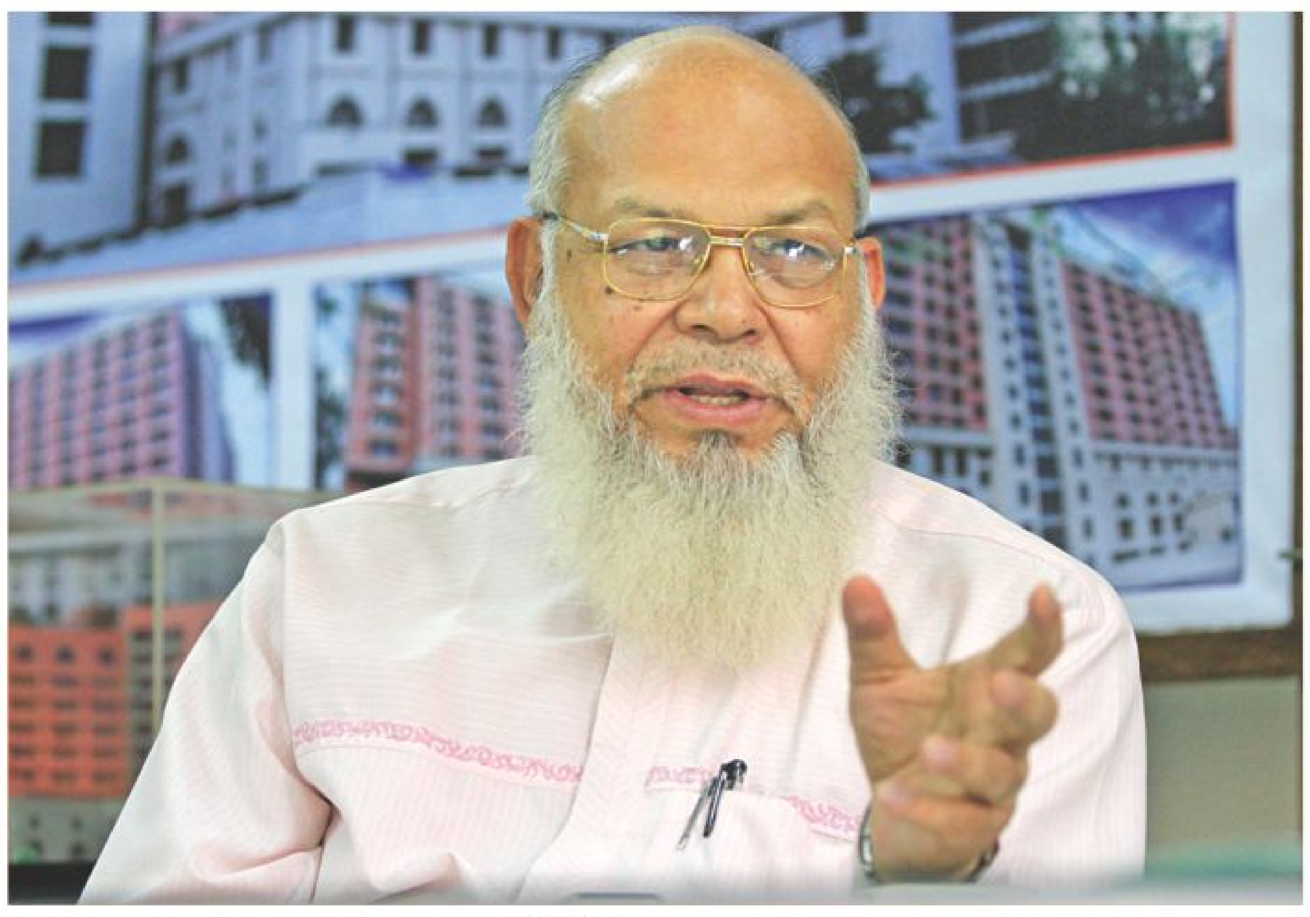
The idea to set up the hospital was very personal for Alam, as his wife had to take treatment abroad when she was diagnosed with cancer in 1994.

"At the time, most people took cancer treatment in India. The well-off would go to Singapore."

As most people in Bangladesh are not much aware of cancer, the disease is diagnosed at the last moment when only the rich can afford treatment, he said.

"If we can diagnose the disease in its early stage, we will be able to give patients a normal life."

It was in 1994 when the mission set out to build the hospital. Alam wrote to Rajuk for the land, but he could not begin construction until 2004 due to a lack of funds.



Kazi Rafiqul Alam

With the help of The Daily Star and Prothom Alo, the two leading newspapers in the country, the mission spread mass appeal to raise funds.

The biggest boost came in 2004 when Dutch-Bangla Bank, a top private commercial bank, donated Tk 4 crore to the cause.

"After that, people started to donate. We did not know most of these people. They are all ordinary people. The public also positively responded to our two lotteries, which gave us a fund of Tk 7 crore."

Alam was fascinated by the generosity of the common people.

"One rickshaw-puller sent a money order for Tk 20. Another woman sent Tk 500 from her daily savings of rice, while a school teacher sent Tk 1,500 which was his total monthly income."

"This hospital will remain a milestone in the philanthropic arena," he said.

The hospital will be run on a 'no-profit-no-loss' basis and 30 percent of services will be provided free of cost to the poor and needy patients.

There are also provisions for donors to sponsor different facilities of the hospital in one's own name or in the name of their loved ones.

The cost of treatment and services would also be much lower than those available at top hospitals in Bangladesh, said Alam.

The mission has already set up a fund so the poor can receive treatment for free or at subsidised rates.

Unlike other projects, the mission did not have the funds upfront to set up the largest philanthropic project in the country.

"We received funds as the project progressed."

Dhaka Ahsania Mission will require another Tk 80 crore to Tk 100 crore to complete the project. As of February, it spent Tk 109.29 crore from the Tk 112 crore it received so far in donations.

It has a funding commitment of Tk 88 crore in the pipeline.

Dhaka Ahsania Mission is not new to health care. It established Ahsania Mission Cancer and General Hospital in Mirpur in 2001.

It began as a cancer hospital, but later, facilities for general patients were incorporated into the 42-bed not-for-profit hospital. It also provides 30 percent of treatment and services free or at subsidised rates to the poor.

Set up by Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah, eminent educationist, reformer and spiritual leader, Dhaka Ahsania Mission was founded in 1958 and is the top philanthropic organisation in the country.

The mission works in the area of early childhood development, primary education, adult literacy, rural enterprise development, child rights, child labour, adolescent rights, ethnic community, disability, social exclusion, gender, ultra poor and urban poor.

The mission is now working on over 78 development projects in 48 districts of Bangladesh.

It owns 28 organisations including Ahsanullah University of Science and Technology, Ahsania Mission College, Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah Teachers Training College and clothing brand Nogordola.

Alam has been involved with the mission from his youth; he became its general secretary in 1976 and president in 2004.

The 66-year-old now handles a fund of Tk 200 crore to run the mission's country-wide activities.

Alam said the Ahsania Mission envisions a Bangladesh where people are free from poverty and hunger and the disadvantaged groups in particular experience an improved social, economic and spiritual life.

The success in setting up the hospital boosted Alam's morale to take up similar development projects.

The mission has already undertaken an ambitious plan for street children.

The mission will set up Ahsania Mission Children City to rehabilitate and rear 10,000 of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged street children.

The project too will rely on public grants to take care of the children between the age of 6 and 18.

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Holcim, Lafarge create global concrete giant

AFP, *Geneva*

SWISS cement group Holcim and French rival Lafarge are merging to create the biggest global concrete group worth 40.0 billion euros, with an eye to booming construction in emerging markets, they said on Monday.

The deal, a major event in the global construction industry described in a joint statement as "a merger of equals", will be based on the offer of one Holcim share for one Lafarge share.

The two groups together have a stock market value of 40 billion euros ($55 billion), Holcim chairman Rolf Soiron told a press conference.

The companies made a commitment to sell assets to pre-empt anti-trust objections from competition authorities. Soiron said these disposals would account for annual sales of 5.0 billion euros, two thirds of which would occur in Europe.

Lafarge assured that the deal would not lead directly to plant closures.

On the Swiss stock market, the price of Holcim shares jumped 3.37 percent to 82.90 Swiss francs in morning trading. In Paris, Lafarge shares were up 3.06 percent to 66.05 euros. Their stocks had already risen sharply on Friday to rumours of merger talks.

The new company will be called LafargeHolcim and "will have a unique position in 90 countries and will be evenly balanced between developing countries and countries with strong growth," the firms said in a join statement.

They highlighted the match of their activities since Lafarge has a strong presence in Africa and Holcim in Latin America. However they both have big and competing interests in Europe.

In Zurich, stock analyst Ute Haibach at brokers J. Safra Sarasin said the deal should result in "more balanced exposure in emerging markets."

At stock brokers Aurel BGC in Paris, analysts said that the merger would be "long and complex but was technically possible".

Figures in the statement show that the new giant will employ 136,000 people across the countries where it operates, have annual sales of 32 billion euros and underlying profits of 6.5 billion euros.

The deal would generate economies of scale of 1.4 billion euros over three years.

LafargeHolcim will be in a powerful position as a supplier of cement for concrete, a key material in the construction of buildings and infrastructure. It is a sector in which new technologies are being used increasingly in materials, including cement.

AFP

Indian employees of the country's third-biggest drugs company Sun Pharma walk outside its research and development centre in Mumbai yesterday. Sun Pharma yesterday announced a $3.2-billion deal to buy larger domestic rival Ranbaxy from Daiichi Sankyo, ending the Japanese company's costly run as owner.

Tyre-makers shine as car owners replace bald rubber

REUTERS, *Mumbai*

REPLACEMENT tyres are buoying Indian tyre companies as a sputtering domestic economy hits vehicle sales, crimping orders from automakers.

India's top six tyre-makers by value are forecast to see average revenue growth of 11.8 percent in the fiscal year that started this month, according to Thomson Reuters SmartEstimates. That would be the fastest expansion in three years.

Tyre-makers including Apollo Tyres Ltd, India's biggest by revenue, are leaning on car and truck owners replacing worn-out tyres on vehicles bought during the 2009-2011 boom to insulate them from slower demand for original tyres. The margins for replacement tyres are up to 10 percentage points higher than those for originals, analysts say.

"Even if you were to make less number of tyres or sell less number of tyres, if you sell more in the replacement (segment), then your balance sheet gets stronger," said Satish Sharma, president for Asia Pacific, Middle East and North Africa at Apollo Tyres, declining to elaborate on the company's margins.

The automakers are stuck in the slow lane as the industry suffers its second consecutive year of weak sales, hurt by high interest rates and rising fuel prices. While a prolonged downturn in new vehicle sales would eventually cut tyre replacement demand, for now it is proving a boon.

Replacement tyres accounted for 67 percent of Apollo's India revenue in the nine months through December. In the fiscal year ended in March 2012, which marked the end of car sales boom, replacement tyres made up 56 percent of its revenue.

Demand for replacements in recent months has also been lifted by the general elections, said Rajiv Budhraja, director-general of Automotive Tyre Manufacturers Association (ATMA), as political campaigning spurs orders for road-worthy wheels in the country's vast rural areas.

Favourable monsoon rains last year, which put more money into farmers' hands, have also helped boost tyre replacement sales.

Mumbai-based Angel Broking expects tyre replacement demand will grow 10 percent over fiscal years 2013 to 2015, assuming a vehicle life of 10 years and that tyres are replaced every three years. It said demand from automakers will be subdued for the same period.

Shares in Apollo have jumped 56 percent in 2014, while CEAT Ltd is up 23 percent and MRF Ltd has risen 16 percent, outpacing a 6 percent gain in the main index.

Local manufacturers sell $8 billion worth of tyres a year and compete with global players such as Continental AG and Bridgestone Corp.

World Bank trims China, East Asia 2014 growth forecasts

REUTERS, *Singapore*

THE World Bank trimmed its 2014 growth forecast for developing East Asia but said the region's economies were likely to see steady growth in the next couple of years, helped by a pick-up in global growth and trade.

The Washington-based development bank expects the developing East Asia and Pacific (EAP) region to grow 7.1 percent in 2014 and 2015, down from the 7.2 percent rate it had previously forecast for both years.

Growth in 2016 is also seen at 7.1 percent, staying slightly below the 2013 growth rate of 7.2 percent, according to the World Bank's latest East Asia and Pacific Economic Update report issued on Monday.

"For East Asia, we believe that the drivers of growth are going to be increasingly from the external front, because of the recovery in advanced economies," World Bank East Asia and Pacific chief economist Bert Hofman told reporters.

In its report, the World Bank said improving global trade would offset headwinds from the tightening of global financial markets.

Emerging markets, including those in Asia, had been roiled by capital outflows from around May to September last year as investors began positioning for the US Federal Reserve to start tapering its monetary stimulus.

While financial markets in the East Asia Pacific region have shown a muted reaction to the Fed's actual decision in December to begin scaling back its quantitative easing, the possibility of capital flow reversals remains a concern for developing countries in the region, the World Bank said.

The prospects for a normalisation of US policy rates will put upward pressure on interest rates and could trigger more sizeable capital outflows from weaker economies, as well as make debt management more difficult in countries where leverage has risen, the bank said.

"Vigilance on capital flows remains warranted," Hofman said, although he added that most of the capital flows in East Asia were now from foreign direct investment rather than portfolio flows, making them less volatile than in the past.

REUTERS

World Bank President Jim Yong Kim speaks on "challenges and priorities for the World Bank in addressing global inequity" at a forum hosted by the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington on April 1.

CHINA GROWTH

The World Bank trimmed its 2014 growth forecast for China to 7.6 percent, from 7.7 percent previously. It kept the 2015 growth forecast for China steady at 7.5 percent, down slightly from 7.7 percent actual growth in 2013.

The new 2014 outlook reflected "the bumpy start to the year," it said, noting that China's industrial production and exports had been weak in the January-February period.

"While the growth rate of industrial production has slowed, and exports contracted in the first two months of 2014, the trend is nevertheless strengthening, and we expect quarterly growth to rise at midyear as external demand from the high-income countries solidifies," the World Bank said.

Among Southeast Asian economies, the biggest changes in the World Bank's economic forecasts were for Thailand and Myanmar.

It cut its forecast for Thailand's economic growth to 3.0 percent in 2014 and 4.5 percent in 2015, from its previous forecasts of 4.5 percent and 5.0 percent, respectively.

The bank said a recovery in external demand would lift growth in Thailand compared with the 2.9 percent actual growth in 2013.

Domestic demand in Thailand, however, remains dampened because of the ongoing political unrest, which has affected tourism receipts, public investment and investor confidence, it said.

"If the political situation stabilizes sufficiently ... growth will be stronger in 2014," the bank said.

Growth in Myanmar is likely to stabilise at 7.8 percent in 2014-2016, after the government made progress in 2013 on macroeconomic reforms, it said. The World Bank had previously forecast 6.9 percent growth for Myanmar in both 2014 and 2015.

The World Bank said downside and upside risks to growth in developing East Asia Pacific countries were evenly balanced.

"At the global level, a slower-than-expected recovery in advanced economies or a steady rise in interest rates, coupled with increased volatility in commodity prices due to recent geopolitical tensions could mean a less hospitable environment for growth," it said.