Alibaba founder pledges more investment in India

AFP, *New Delhi*

Alibaba founder Jack Ma, China's wealthiest man, said Wednesday he plans to invest more funds in India and believes the Internet can transform the country's future.

Ma, whose Alibaba controls 80 percent of e-commerce in China, was speaking to a business audience on his first visit to India, two months after his record initial-public-share offering raised $25 billion.

"We will invest more in India, work with Indian entrepreneurs and technology companies," the billionaire promised in New Delhi, without naming any figures.

He said his Hangzhou-based Alibaba already has on its site a large number of small Indian businesses selling goods -- from spices and chocolates to tea -- to more than 400,000 Chinese customers.

He forecast more Indian goods would be sold on his Chinese site as his exchanges with India picked up.

The 50-year-old executive chairman of Alibaba said there was huge scope for "mutual engagement" in technology between India and China and that it could "change (the) lives" of many small businesses.

"I was a teacher earlier and the Internet changed my life. Right now is a wonderful time for businesses in India and China to work together," he said. Ma's entourage was keeping a tight lip on the businessman's itinerary.

The executive "will be participating in a number of meetings with local businesses," said a spokeswoman, declining to disclose more.

The Economic Times newspaper reported that Ma's delegation included 99 business people.

Ma, China's richest individual with a net worth of nearly $30 billion, was set to meet several Indian entrepreneurs.

Alibaba already has a small presence in the Indian market with a business-to-business start-up launched in 2010, but analysts expect it to expand in India's e-commerce market, possibly through online marketplace Snapdeal.

Japan's SoftBank, the largest shareholder in Alibaba with one-third, became last month the biggest single investor in the Indian online retail firm.

It pumped $627 million into Snapdeal, which styles itself as the "Indian version" of Alibaba, and has grown explosively in the country's fast-expanding e-commerce market.

Local reports said Ma was expected to meet Kunal Bahl, the 30-year-old co-founder of Snapdeal and its chief executive. But Snapdeal declined to confirm any meeting.

Speculation has been mounting that Ma might join hands with the Indian company to build a bigger e-commerce presence in India.

Ma's whirlwind 48-hour-trip comes in the wake of other visits by top e-commerce figures such as Jeff Bezos, founder and chief executive of Amazon.

Amazon, which has a marketplace model in India, and Alibaba, which sources from India, are locked in fierce competition globally.

Jack Ma

BANK ASIA

Sohana Rouf Chowdhury, a director of Bank Asia, opens the bank's 91st branch on Ring Road in Adabor, Dhaka yesterday. Zakia Rouf Chowdhury, executive vice chairperson of Rangs Group, was also present.

Samsung sells units and announces $2b share buyback

AFP, *Seoul*

Samsung announced Wednesday the $1.7 billion sale of stakes in four affiliates and a $2.0 billion share buyback as the South Korean giant steps up restructuring efforts ahead of a generational ownership succession.

The sale of its petrochemical and defence units to the Hanwha conglomerate, which has major petrochemical holdings, is expected to be finalised in the first half of next year, Samsung Group said in a statement.

The deal involves Samsung Electronics and other group affiliates selling their combined stakes in defence firm Samsung Techwin and Samsung General Chemicals.

A 50-percent stake held by Samsung General Chemicals in its joint venture with the French energy giant Total, called Samsung Total, will also be sold to Hanwha, along with Samsung Techwin's 50-percent holding in a joint venture with French defence firm Thales.

It marks the first sale of Samsung affiliates since the group was forced to shed its struggling carmaking unit in 1997 during the Asian financial crisis.

The group, comprised of dozens of units including the flagship Samsung Electronics, earns a collective revenue equal to around 20 percent of South Korea's annual economic output.

Separately Wednesday, Samsung Electronics announced a share buyback plan valued at 2.2 trillion won ($2 billion) -- a move to appease shareholders frustrated with a slumping share price.

The buyback from Thursday to February involves 1.96 trillion won worth of common shares and 229.5 billion worth of preferred shares, the firm said in a regulatory filing.

The announcement came after trading closed on the Seoul stock market.

The world's top maker of mobile phones and TVs has been under growing pressure to boost returns for shareholders including increasing dividends.

Its share price tumbled more than 10 percent this year as growth in the key smartphone business began to lose steam, sapping profits.

Samsung Electronics last month reported its smallest quarterly profit in nearly three years.

The family-run Samsung Group, currently chaired by Lee Kun-Hee, has merged, broken out or newly listed some of its key units in recent years as he prepares to hand over helm to his son, J.Y. Lee.

The founding Lee family has been under growing state pressure to unravel its complex cross shareholdings and make its governing structure more transparent.

ADB ready to work with new China-led bank, says president

AFP, *Manila*

The head of the Asian Development Bank said Wednesday he is ready to work with China on a new infrastructure investment lender proposed by Beijing, despite fears it could undermine his institution.

The Manila-based ADB is too large and established to be threatened by the proposed lender, Takehiko Nakao told a foreign correspondents forum in the Philippines.

"If the AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank) is established, we are very happy to have the appropriate collaboration," Nakao said, adding the banks could potentially co-finance projects.

Last month, China and 20 other Asian countries signed a memorandum of understanding to establish the AIIB, an institution whose development has been driven by China and which will be based in Beijing, according to the Chinese state news agency Xinhua.

However the proposed lender is seen as a potential rival to existing Western- and Japanese-dominated institutions such as the World Bank and the ADB.

The Japanese government has expressed concern, while the United States is reportedly fiercely opposed to the AIIB, which some analysts see as a venue to expand Chinese influence at their expense.

Nakao, who said he had not had any formal contact with Beijing over the proposal, said it was "understandable" that Asian countries would want such an institution because of the region's huge need for infrastructure financing.

He said Asia required $800 billion a year in funding for infrastructure, particularly for energy and ports. Of the 20 countries that signed the AIIB memorandum, only India and Singapore are considered large economies.

However Nakao stressed that the ADB had always been active in infrastructure, even as it also supports social services as part of its mission of poverty-reduction.

"The ADB's focus has always been infrastructure," he said.

"China has always been very supportive of the ADB so Chinese authorities have been saying (the AIIB) will be complementing and supporting the work of the ADB," he added.

DBH

Faruq A Choudhury, chairman of Delta Brac Housing Finance, presides over the 18th annual general meeting of the company in Dhaka on Tuesday. QM Shariful Ala, managing director, was also present. DBH approved 25 percent cash dividend for the year ending on June 30, 2014.

BlackBerry courts iPhone users with cash

AFP, *Montreal*

Canadian smartphone maker BlackBerry is wooing Apple customers with a cash offer for trade-ins of iPhones for its new square-screened, keyboard-equipped Passport.

The promotion was announced late Monday and will be available starting next month until February 13, in Canada and the United States.

Customers who trade in their iPhones could receive up to $400 cash back depending on the model and condition of their trade-in, plus a $150 gift card.

This marks the first time that BlackBerry has gone head-to-head with Apple since the Canadian firm launched a turnaround plan last year aimed at stemming massive losses. The Passport was launched in September.

Named for its approximate size to the travel document, the phone was designed to win back key corporate users after BlackBerry was effectively knocked out of the highly competitive consumer smartphone market dominated by Apple and Samsung.

Investors seemed pleased, pushing up the Waterloo, Ontario-based company's share price slightly in morning trading.

But analysts were more skeptical. Carl Simard of Medici called it a very "desperate move."

In September, BlackBerry reported it narrowed its loss in the latest quarter, and expressed optimism that its major restructuring and new business-friendly devices would help fuel a turnaround.

For the three months ended August 30, BlackBerry posted a loss of $207 million on $916 billion in revenues largely split between sales of services and software and more than two million smartphones.

The Canadian manufacturer pioneered the smartphone market but has struggled to keep up with competitors in recent years.

A well-functioning free trade area to give a boost to South Asia

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The Mexico example also emphasises the need for leadership and preparation for reforms. South Asian leaders can overcome domestic concerns through a combination of strong leadership, and proactive and targeted retraining and safety net measures for workers that will be adversely affected by reforms. They should phase in complete trade liberalisation over a reasonable but finite time period -- implying a clear timeline for zero tariffs on all products and quickly reducing procedural hindrances to trade.

A fully functioning Safta is an essential first step in the vision of an economic union. Leaders should complete Safta with the right mix of reforms so that the benefits of deeper integration can begin to be seen on the horizon.

Sanjay Kathuria is lead economist, South Asia Regional Cooperation and Integration, World Bank; Sohaib Shahid works at the regional integration department at the World Bank and is a PhD candidate in international economics at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies.

Germany agrees law on quota for women board members

AFP, *Berlin*

Germany's biggest companies will have to fill 30 percent of supervisory board positions with women candidates from 2016 under a law agreed late Tuesday by the country's ruling parties.

Enterprises that fail to find suitable female candidates for their board of directors will have to leave them vacant under a so-called "empty chair sanction".

"I'm sure that in the end no chair will remain empty because there are enough women who are qualified to do these very important jobs," Women's Affairs Minister Manuela Schwesig told public radio Wednesday.

"This law is an important step for equality because it will initiate cultural change in the workplace."

Chancellor Angela Merkel, who had initially opposed the reform, told parliament Wednesday: "It has been decided and it is coming. We can't afford to do without the skills of women."

The rule would apply to about 100 listed companies with employee representatives on the non-executive supervisory board, while another 3,500 enterprises will have to publish their gender-equality targets in coming years.

German Industries Federation chief Ulrich Grillo said businesses wanted more women in leadership positions but called a legal quota "counter-productive", adding: "I continue to prefer voluntary solutions".

Justice Minister Heiko Maas called the agreement a "historic decision" that would "make Germany a more modern country".

"The story that there aren't enough qualified women is for people who are mentally stuck in the past century," he said.

The quota for women was approved in principle last year by the two big parties in Germany's "grand coalition" government, Merkel's conservative Christian Democrats (CDU) and the centre-left Social Democrats (SPD).

However, they were only able to agree on all the details after late-night discussions involving Merkel and Vice Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel, whose SPD had made the women's quota one of its top priorities.

Several CDU lawmakers had long complained of excessive burdens on business and called for some sectors to be exempt.

Merkel's cabinet is due to sign off on the bill on December 11, after which parliamentary passage would be a formality given the grand coalition's overwhelming majority.

AFP

German Family Minister Manuela Schwesig arrives for the weekly cabinet meeting at the Chancellery in Berlin on November 19.

PUBALI BANK

Helal Ahmed Chowdhury, managing director of Pubali Bank, launches Pubali Cash, an inland remittance service for the unbanked, at a programme in Dhaka on Monday. MA Halim Chowdhury, additional managing director, was also present.

Opec looks for help to tackle oil supply glut

AFP, *Vienna*

Opec needs non-cartel members to help address an oil supply glut that is set to grow next year, Iran's oil minister said here Wednesday.

"All the experts in the markets believe that we have an oversupply on the market and next year we will have more oversupply," Iran's Oil Minister Bijan Namdar Zanganeh told reporters.

But Zanganeh said it was not solely up to the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries to tackle the oversupply which is sending crude prices crashing to four-year low points.

"To deal with this situation we need to have a contribution from non-Opec producers for managing the market," he told reporters on arrival in Vienna, where the cartel is headquartered.

IDCOL

Mohammad Mejbahuddin, chairman of Infrastructure Development Company Ltd, poses during the company's 17th annual general meeting at The Westin in Dhaka on Monday. Mahmood Malik, chief executive, was also present.