

# As Ford closes, European rust belt seeks new ideas

REUTERS, Genk, Belgium  
In the heart of western Europe, the Belgian-Dutch-German rust belt has been dealt another blow.

Two car plants closed this month as companies sought cheaper labour elsewhere, the final chapter of a manufacturing boom that began when coal mines fuelling Europe's industrialisation shut in the 1960s.

Now the region straddling three borders is trying to reinvent itself. A 315 billion euro EU investment plan, announced on Thursday, is the latest potential help. It aims to encourage investors to back projects around Europe needing financing including the start-ups that could bring new ideas to skilled but high-wage workers.

The final production day at Ford Motor Co's plant in the eastern Belgian city of Genk came barely two weeks after General Motors closed its Opel Bochum factory across the border in Germany, both

part of automakers' strategy to adapt to falling sales following the euro zone crisis.

"I worked at Ford Genk for almost 40 years, I've never applied for another job in all my life," said Pierre Boonen, 57, after one of his last shifts at the plant that generated work directly or indirectly for around 10,000 people. "I never expected this."

Workers have been compensated, but many are over 40 and have little idea of what to do next. "Even if the young have a tough time finding a job, it's even worse for the older employees," said 53-year-old worker Margot and as a group of protesters outside the plant help up signs reading "What now?"

With the euro zone economy facing deflation and near record unemployment, investors are also looking to the European Central Bank to revive business confidence with a U.S.-style money printing stimulus programme.

And while the Limburg region is

home to other manufacturing and chemical industries such as chip designer Melexis to life sciences group DSM contributing to an economic output bigger than some euro zone countries, the demise of car manufacturing in border shows that parts of Europe needs a new economic model.

"In the 1970s and 1980s, the policy was to attract a big plant and that was going to save you," said Karen Maguire, an expert at the Paris-based Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. "That only lasts for so long unless you can innovate, upgrade and diversify."

One innovative local company is Polyscope, which set up in a disused chemicals plant in Dutch Limburg in 2007. It exports granular plastics that are turned into paper coating or sun roofs to the United States and China. It employs 50 people and has annual revenues of \$40 million.

"We need innovation connected

to our industrial base," said Patrick Muezers, Polyscope's CEO and who previously worked in the automotive industry. "We cannot all be consultants."

Work has also begun on a 93-hectare science park on the site of an old coal mine near Genk - its rotting brick buildings and broken glass windows still dotted around - to be ready in 2017, with the aim of developing medical and energy technology.

Underpinning the entrepreneurs are public initiatives aimed at effectively removing the Belgian-Dutch-German border to create an economic region that is not limited by national boundaries and linking smaller cities such as Eindhoven, where Philips has its research facilities, to the university cities of Belgium's Leuven and Germany's Aachen.

"There's a lot of potential here. In a wider, 500-kilometre radius, you have 60 percent of the purchasing power of the whole of Europe," said Johann Leten at Flemish business group Voka.



LANKABANGLA FINANCE

**Khurshed Alam, head of retail finance at LankaBangla Finance, and Subrata Bhowmik, senior deputy general manager of Dom-Inno Developments, attend the signing of an agreement recently. The companies will give preferential treatment to each others' clients.**

## Prime Bank gets new MD

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Ahmed Kamal Khan Chowdhury has joined as managing director of Prime Bank, it said in a statement yesterday.

He was serving as acting managing director before the appointment, it said.

Chowdhury has experience as head of finance, risk management, head office credit review committee and worked on business development and business re-engineering process, it said.

Chowdhury holds a masters in Economics from Dhaka University, and an MBA in Finance. He has worked with several local and foreign commercial banks in different capacities during his 30-year career, it said.



## New rice seed raises hopes for more crop

FROM PAGE B1

The Bri Dhan-62 variety contains 19 to 20 parts per million of zinc against 14 to 16 ppm found in other high-yielding rice varieties.

The yield from Bri Dhan-62 would be lower though, they said. Around 3.5-4.5 tonnes can be obtained from each hectare of land, which is lower than the yields from Bri Dhan-33 and Bina Dhan-7, the other two relatively short-maturing rice varieties. They take 110-120 days to harvest.

But Kashem said his fellow farmers, who cultivated the new variety, did not receive less than 5 tonnes of paddy per hectare. "Initially, I could not believe it, so I got a scale and weighed it properly."

"If you eat the rice right after harvesting it, you will find it to be sticky. But if you give it a couple of months, the grain becomes fine and tasty," said Rabiul Islam, a small farmer from Cheuria, Kushtia.

Islam, who previously cultivated the Bri Dhan-33 variety, said he yielded more with the Bri Dhan-62 seeds. He even began cultivating pulses earlier than in previous seasons.

"My yield of pulses will be higher this time," he said, adding that he preserved the Bri Dhan-62 seeds to grow in the next season.

Bhogirath Chandra Tati, a farmer from Manda, Naogaon, a northwest district, said, "Many of my relatives and fellow farmers have already contacted me for seeds. They are interested in growing the rice for its ability to mature fast and its higher nutrient content."

Tati grew the Bina Dhan-7 variety ear-

lier, but was subsequently unable to harvest 'good mustard' for a lack of time. This rice variety gets sticky after cooking, he added.

"My mustard field looks excellent now. I will harvest it in 30 days and then transplant boro rice. It seems that for the first time, I will be able to sell some mustard and make a few extra bucks."

He, however, said the yield from Bri Dhan-62 was lower than Swarna.

"But growers get good prices for the grain quality and early harvest," Tati said. Jiban Krishna Biswas, Bri director general, said the variety performed better on farmer's field than initially thought.

"The yield per hectare was more than 5 tonnes in some areas. Such yield is quite high for a 100-day timeframe. I did not expect that."

Mazharul Anwar, principal scientific officer of on-farm research division of Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute's Rangpur office, said their cultivation bagged 3.5 tonnes of yield per hectare.

AZM Momtazul Karim, director general of Department of Agricultural Extension, said the variety performs better in water-scarce areas and can also be grown during the boro season.

"The Bri Dhan-62 will be instrumental in cultivating four crops a year," said Rafiqul Islam Mondal, executive chairman of Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council.

"After harvesting this variety during the aman season, farmers will be able to grow mustard or potato. They can later go for boro or mung cultivation and after that, aus rice."

## Take steps to discourage rice imports

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Rice imports in just five and a half months of this fiscal year crossed last year's total, as businessmen found foreign produce cheaper than local output. Bangladesh's private importers brought in 4.45 lakh tonnes of rice from July to December 17, exceeding last year's total import of 3.74 lakh tonnes, according to food ministry data.

Surging rice imports supported by an absence of duty and the aman harvests, the year's second largest rice crop, have already lowered prices in the domestic market, affecting both farmers and local millers.

Retail prices of all types of rice, irrespective of quality, have declined between one percent and 3.53 percent in Dhaka markets, according to data from state run Trading Corporation of Bangladesh.

In the face of spiralling imports, many millers are avoiding milling of paddy, fearing stiff competition from imported rice, Md Abdur Rashid, president of Bangladesh Auto, Major and Husking Mills Association, said last week.

He demanded the government impose duties rice imports so that farmers do not feel discouraged to grow the staple in the upcoming boro season.

The government has kept a zero-duty facility on rice imports since fiscal 2006-07, according to National Board of Revenue. Dara said the parliamentary committee discussed the issue following media reports and favoured taking measures to discourage rice imports by consulting related ministries.

Islam however said rice imports are negligible considering overall demand and production in the country.

Production rose to 3.44 crore tonnes in fiscal 2013-14, from 3.38 crore tonnes a year ago, according to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. Bangladesh requires nearly 1 lakh tonnes of rice a day, said Islam.

"There is nothing to worry about. However, we will discuss the matter with the commerce ministry on whether duty benefits for rice import can be withdrawn."

Some imports are aromatic rice and some low quality rice is also being imported as cattle feed, Islam said.

"I don't think such imports can influence the market. But a section of people are trying to create confusion when we are exporting rice abroad."

On the recent fall in rice prices, he said prices usually go down during the peak harvesting period.



DHAKA REGENCY

**Kabir Reza, chairman of Dhaka Regency Hotel, presides over its seventh annual general meeting on the premises of the hotel yesterday. Arif Motahar, managing director, was also present.**



UNION CAPITAL

**Abul Munim Khan, executive vice president of Union Capital, opens a branch of the company in Tongi recently. ANM Golam Shabbir, vice president, was also present.**



REHAB

**Officials of Real Estate and Housing Association of Bangladesh attend a press meet to announce the REHAB Winter Fair 2014, at National Press Club in Dhaka recently.**

## Change attitude towards women entrepreneurs: Atiur to bankers

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Chittagong

The central bank governor yesterday urged bankers to change their attitude towards women and women entrepreneurs, as they are hardly found to be loan defaulters.

No sustainable economic progress is possible if women are not engaged in productive and income generating activities, he said.

He spoke at an SME seminar on credit access for women entrepreneurs, its chal-

lenges and the way forward, at Hotel Agrabad in the port city.

Bangladesh Bank and Chittagong Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CWCCI) jointly organised the programme, where 11 women entrepreneurs of the division were honoured with SME award.

Industries Secretary Md Mosharraf Hossain Bhuiyan and CWCCI President Kamrun Malek were also present.

## Internet giant joins hands with Grameen China

FROM PAGE B1

During his five-day stay in China, Yunus also visited Lükou village in Jiangsu province in southern China, more than 1,000 kilometres from Beijing, to see the operations of Grameen China.

Grameen initiated a microcredit programme in Lukou under the direction of experienced staff from Bangladesh.

Yunus took part in a workshop with the villagers, where migration of young people from villages to cities for higher income was one of the major issues.

The workshop shed light on how to create social businesses generating attractive income for the young in the villages.

As the chief guest, Yunus on December 15 joined an annual microcredit conference organised by CAM and attended by 700 microcredit practitioners, academics, policymakers, company executives and students.

Yunus also had a high-level meeting with Madam Wu, chairman of the People's Congress Committee on Rural Finance Office

at the Central Bank of China, to discuss issues related to finance for the poor in China at her office in the central bank.

Yunus was also invited to join hands with a collaborative programme with Tencent, the fifth largest internet company in the world after Google, Amazon, Alibaba and e-Bay. The proposal was made by Arthur Cao, owner of Tencent, which has a bank called WeBank and WeChat, the biggest internet search engine in China.

Later, Cao, Yunus and Dr Sun Xuetao, secretary of Longnan Municipal Committee of the Communist Party of China, discussed the outline of collaboration among Tencent, City of Longnan and Yunus Centre for social business and microcredit initiatives in the city.

"If it works, Tencent can take this collaboration to other cities, counties, and provinces," Yunus Centre said.

Yunus also gave a public lecture on the potential of social business to transform societies to an audience of 800 at Peking University, where he is a visiting professor.



PUBALI BANK

**MA Halim Chowdhury, managing director (current charge) of Pubali Bank, opens the bank's 430th branch at Katiadi, Kishoreganj recently. Safiul Alam Khan Chowdhury, deputy managing director, was also present.**



BANGLACAT

**Officials of BanglaCAT, authorised dealer of Caterpillar Inc USA in Bangladesh, attend a programme to celebrate the company's 10 years of operations in Bangladesh recently.**



JALALABAD GAS

**Mohammad Ahsanul Jabbar, chairman of Jalalabad Gas Transmission and Distribution Systems, attends the company's 28th annual general meeting in Dhaka recently. Istiak Ahmed, chairman of Petrobangla, was also present.**