

Korean firm lights up remote villages with solar power

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Zero Enterprise, a Korean company in Bangladesh, has set up three solar home systems serving 15 homes in the remote villages of Gopalganj and Chandpur under its corporate social responsibility programme.

The company distributed solar home systems of Taeho Machinery Co, a renowned Korean manufacturer of innovative and higher capacity solar home systems.

Zero Enterprise organised a CSR ceremony with Power Cell of Bangladesh, in partnership with KOTRA, the commercial section of the Korean Embassy, at Sonargaon Hotel in Dhaka on Wednesday.

Zero Enterprise teamed up with KOTRA to set up the three 450-watt solar home systems. "A unique feature of the solar home system is its rechargeable solar cell that shortens charging time and extends service life of the battery," said Kyu Hwang Choi, managing director of Zero Enterprise.

Another important component of the solar home system is the non-motorised eco rechargeable generator, which is powered by solar energy and generates 450 watt to 10 kilowatt, Choi added.

"Our system is suitable for providing power to a group of households, schools, shops and power for street vendors," he said. "Our higher capacity solar home system can support both alternating current and direct current."

The company provides a two-year replacement warranty for the system that consists of an eco friendly rechargeable generator, solar module, and light-emitting diode lamps, he said.

"The system also has a handle. Anyone can rotate the handle for quick charge and power generation."

"Our unit is portable with a strong battery and is priced competitively."

The CSR initiative was part of a joint commitment by the Korean company and government, toward improving the living standards of the rural communities of Bangladesh, said Jinhak Hur, director general of KOTRA.

Solar power is important for Bangladesh and good quality solar home systems from Zero Enterprise have good prospects in this market, Hur added.

Oman sees \$6.47b budget deficit amid oil slump

AFP, Muscat

Non-OPEC member Oman on Thursday announced a budget deficit for 2015 of \$6.47 billion, reflecting the effect on Gulf producers of plummeting crude oil prices.

The budget includes expenditure of \$36.5 billion, up 4.5 percent from 2014, and revenue of \$30.03 billion, down 1.0 percent, the official ONA news agency cited the finance ministry as saying.

The projected deficit will represent 21 percent of public revenue and 8.0 percent of the sultanate's GDP.

Oman is a small producer of crude, at about one million barrels per day.

Current expenditure accounts for the lion's share at 68 percent of public spending, far ahead of investments (23 percent), the ministry said.

Because of the falling price of oil the government had to "take preventative measures."

Continental Insurance launches website

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Continental Insurance yesterday launched its new corporate website to increase client satisfaction.

AKM Azizur Rahman, director of the company, inaugurated the website at a programme at The Daily Star Centre in the capital.

"We have brought 24 out of our 53 branches under the online network," Rahman said. "Our clients abroad can now access product related information through the new website."

"The new website will ensure increased accountability, and we will bring all the branches online very soon," he said.

"We will disseminate all new information through the website," he said. The company has trained its officials to better serve customers through the online network, he said.

Continental Insurance announced its solidarity with the digital Bangladesh theme through the launch of the website, he said.

"We are in the digital arena now. The company has updated to the



AKM Azizur Rahman, director of Continental Insurance, attends a programme to launch the website of the company, at The Daily Star Centre in Dhaka yesterday. Khawja Manzer Nadeem, acting managing director, was also present.

website for its clients," said Khawja Manzer Nadeem, acting managing director of Continental Insurance. "Now we can provide our clients with more services and information."

The company has provided

details of all its products on the new website, said Md Tabrez Hossain, executive director of Continental Insurance.

The company will introduce health insurance this year, he said.



Syed Nasim Manzur, president of Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, leads a delegation of the chamber to meet Finance Minister AMA Muhith at the latter's office in Dhaka yesterday. Story on B1

Japan PM Abe pledges reforms to boost economy

AFP, Tokyo

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe Thursday pledged to carry out crucial structural reforms this year as part of his drive to kickstart the economy, while stressing the country remained pacifist as he pursues his nationalist agenda.

"This year we will once again make the economy the foremost priority, delivering the warm winds of economic recovery to every corner of the nation," he said in his new year statement, weeks after winning a landslide election.

"We will decisively execute our growth strategy, carrying out economic (stimulus) measures at an early time," he said, referring to reforms such as deregulation in the energy and farm sectors.

Since he first took office in December 2012 Abe said he has tackled various issues including revamping the country's education and social security systems, and diplomatic and security policies.

"All of the reforms I am pursuing are the most drastic reforms since the end of World War II, with very challenging roads ahead," he said.

With a fresh voter mandate given by a general election victory last month, "this year I will push ahead with reforms even more boldly and with an even greater sense of speed", he said.

Abe has embarked on a policy blitz - dubbed "Abenomics" - to reinvigorate the economy, with a vast government spending and monetary easing

programme. The third "arrow" in his armory are much-needed structural reforms.

Abe, 60, had billed the December 14 election as a referendum on "Abenomics", which has helped exporters by sending the yen sharply lower and boosted stocks.

But his failure to implement some of the tough changes economists say are needed - freeing up the labour market and tackling an inefficient agricultural sector - has left Abe open to the charge that he is pursuing style over substance.

His speech also noted that this year marks the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II and that Japan - with "deep remorse" over its wartime atrocities - "has walked the path of a free and democratic nation and of a consistently peace-loving nation".

His comments come as he seeks warmer ties with old foe China, with which Japan has been engaged in bitter territorial disputes in recent years.

"A we reflect on the past... I wish to make this (year) a year in which we send out to the world a message about the kind of country we aim to be and get off to a dynamic start towards building a 'new Japan'," he said.

He did not detail what a "new Japan" would look like.

Abe last month pledged to pursue his nationalist agenda, including revising the post-war US imposed pacifist constitution and expanding the role of the country's Self-Defense Forces.

Also Thursday, Japanese Emperor Akihito, 81, in his New Year statement stressed the importance of learning about World War II.

"I think it is now extremely important that at this opportunity we fully learn from the history of this war... in thinking about the way Japan should be in the future," Akihito said.

New BIAA board takes office

STAR BUSINESS DESK

MS Siddiqui has recently taken charge of Bangladesh Indenting Agents' Association as the president, the association said in a statement yesterday.

The BIAA also elected SM Jaglul A Mozumdar as senior vice-president and Syed Tasadeque Hossain (Jahangir) as vice-president, according to the statement.

The new board will hold office for 2015 and 2016. The elections take place at the association's 33rd annual general meeting at Fars Hotel & Resorts in Dhaka on Tuesday.



MS Siddiqui

Sylhet Chamber elects new officials

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Salah Uddin Ali Ahmed has recently been elected as the president of Sylhet Chamber of Commerce and Industry, SCCI said in a statement yesterday.

At the same time, Mamun Kibria Sumon became senior vice-president and Masud Ahmed Chowdhury vice-president of the trade body. The chamber also elected new board of directors on Wednesday, according to the statement.

Improve quality of products

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"We are trying to improve infrastructure." The construction work for upgrading the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway to four lanes will be completed by June, the premier said.

She also called upon businesses to increase exports of agricultural products such as vegetables. Such products fetch higher export earnings as those are produced entirely locally.

The government is working to reduce poverty by 10 percent within the next few years, she said. "We do not want to hear that Bangladesh is a poor country. We will be a middle-income country by 2021 and a developed country by 2041."

Hasina also sought cooperation from businesses so that Bangladesh can reach the target of exporting \$50 billion garments by 2021. The foreign exchange reserves stood at \$22.39 billion on December 31, which is sufficient to pay the country's import bills for seven months, she said.

Currently, Bangladesh has been exporting 729 types of products to 192 countries, which proves the country's strength in the global trade, the prime minister added.

Companies from home and abroad will display their products at 500 stalls at the month-long show at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar. The organisers - the commerce ministry and Export Promotion Bureau - allocated 48 stalls to foreign companies and the rest to local firms.

Companies from 14 countries, including China, Malaysia, Iran, Thailand, the US, Turkey, Singapore, Australia and the UK are participating in the fair, which is open to visitors from 9am to 10pm at an entry fee of Tk 30 for adults and Tk 20 for minors. Products like machinery, carpets, cosmetics, electrical and electronics products, jute goods, leather and leather goods and footwear, toys, jewellery, locally-made apparel items, processed foods, furniture and handicrafts will be sold in the show.

Commerce Minister Tofail Ahmed, Commerce Secretary Hedayetullah Al Mamoon and FBCCI President Kazi Akram Uddin Ahmed also spoke.

Help at last for realtors

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REHAB surveyed 209 companies last month and found that they were sitting on 12,185 units of unsold flats worth Tk 8,811.19 crore.

Since the association has around 1,200 member companies, the actual number is far higher, officials said. The companies surveyed sold 1,749 units of flats in 2014, in contrast to 1,965 units in 2013 and 2,370 units in 2012.

The slump can mainly be attributed to the buyers' lack of access to low-cost home loans.

Apartment buyers now have to pay up to 18 percent rates for loans, which ward prospective buyers off. Subsequently, the housing minister, at the REHAB event, also called for a Tk 20,000 crore fund to disburse long-term loans with single digit interest rates to middle-income apartment buyers.

The real estate sector now contributes to around 7 percent to the country's GDP, employing around one lakh skilled people and another 35 lakh in its linkage industries, according to industry people.

suman.saha@thedailystar.net

China manufacturing growth at lowest in 2014

AFP, Beijing

China's manufacturing growth dropped in December to its lowest level of 2014, an official survey showed Thursday, as the sector struggles with weak domestic demand.

China's official Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) released by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) came in at 50.1 last month, down from 50.3 recorded in November.

The index, which tracks activity in factories and workshops, is considered a key indicator of the health of China's economy, a major driver of global growth. A figure above 50 signals expansion, while anything below indicates contraction.

"Growth momentum is still insufficient," NBS said in a statement.

British bank HSBC said Tuesday that its own PMI figure for the month fell to 49.6, down from the breakeven point of 50.0 in November.

Hasina gives nod to proposal for an IGW 'common switch'

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The forum is actually an agreement among the gateways and the government should not directly be involved in the pact, the telecom ministry told the premier in the letter.

As the telecom regulator has been involved in the process, it will ensure that nothing goes against the law or rules, the letter said.

After a couple of meetings with the gateways, the telecom regulator sent the proposal to the telecom ministry for approval.

The regulator also proposed amendments to some clauses of the international long distance telecom policy and relevant guidelines to pave the way for the common switch.

The proposed switch will have two tiers. Tier 2 IGWs will transmit international incoming calls to telecom operators through interconnection exchanges, while tier 1 gateways will only send their entire calls to tier 2, according to the proposal. The regulator has also selected seven IGWs who will receive the lion's share of the income.

However, there will be no single switch that will connect all the IGWs, rather the tier 2 IGWs will work individually.

The system would create a revenue-sharing model that distributes almost twice the revenue to the tier 2 gateways compared to that in tier 1.

The proposal also said each member gateway will contribute a certain amount to the forum as "market development expenses" for the purpose of increasing the number of international incoming and outgoing calls through legal channels.

The forum will also take control of the incoming and outgoing calls of the member gateways if they fail to share the specified amount of their revenue with the government in time.

The proposal may lead to an uneven playing field as it has two tiers, an official of the ministry said, asking not to be named. Two or more parties cannot go for a contract if any of them wants to control the other, and so the system is not viable, he added.

Sunil Kanti Bose, chairman of Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission, said, as soon as the telecom ministry amends the clauses of the long distance telecom policy and IGW guideline, the regulator will execute the system.

"But before that, we will discuss it with all the operators so that it can be done in a proper manner," he said.

Only state-run Bangladesh Telecommunications Company Ltd, which is also an IGW, will remain out of the system, while all the international gateways will have to join. "Initially, we will go for the common switch for six months, and later it may be finalised after reviewing the results," Bose said.

AKM Shamsuddoha, chairman of IGW Operators Forum, had earlier said, "We are not forming any cartel. Such business models are now working globally."

"We do not set the overseas call rates, operators abroad do it." A process has been initiated to save the sector so that everyone's revenue is ensured, he had said. "Nothing illegal is happening."

However, Tanjib Alam & Associates, a law firm that deals with telecom issues, said, as the tier 1 IGWs will no longer transmit calls, they will not feel the need to invest further, reducing overall investment and leading to violation of the Competition Act.

Abu Saeed Khan, senior policy fellow at LRNEasia, an ICT think tank based in Colombo, said setting up the common switch requires comprehensive overhaul of the long-distance telecom policy, followed by amendments to the concerned licences.

Khan said sharing the switch by the gateways is nothing but active infrastructure sharing and the BTRC cannot make it an exclusive privilege.

Therefore, the BTRC "must rewrite infrastructure sharing guidelines to avoid litigation from other stakeholders of the telecoms industry," he said.



M Mosaddek Hossain, managing director of Unimed Pharma, attends the company's annual sales conference in Dhaka on Wednesday. Nazmul Hossain, executive director, was also present.



AHM Mozammel Hoque, chairman of Hamid Fabrics, presides over the company's 20th annual general meeting at Trust Milonayoton in Dhaka on Tuesday. Abdullah Al Mahmud, managing director, was also present. The company approved 10 percent cash and 10 percent stock dividends for its shareholders.