

Bangladesh seeks free access for its products to Thailand

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh has called for duty- and quota-free access for its products to the Thai market to offset the trade imbalance, which is heavily tilted towards Thailand.

Bangladesh's Ambassador to Thailand Saida Muna Tasneem yesterday made the call in a meeting with Thai Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs General Tanasak Patimapragorn, at the Thai foreign ministry in Bangkok on Wednesday.

Tasneem listed out a number of products, including apparels, jute and jute goods, leather and leather products, medicines, sacks and bags, chemical products, for such facility.

The envoy also requested Patimapragorn to encourage Thai investors to invest in Bangladesh, espe-

cially in tourism and hospitality, power generation, food processing, automobiles, machinery, electronics, shipbuilding, hospital and health services industries.

The ambassador stressed the need for exemption of visa for diplomatic and official passports, employment of Bangladeshi workers in Thailand, technical cooperation on fisheries and livestock and between Bangladesh Accreditation Board and the Thai Industrial Standards Institute.

She also called for exploring new institutional cooperation between the two on tourism and culture, defence and security.

The Thai deputy prime minister expressed his government's keen interest to get more actively engaged with Bangladesh towards strengthening bilateral diplomatic and economic relations.

Nearly 40pc of iPhone owners interested in Apple Watch

REUTERS, San Francisco

About 40 percent of adult Apple iPhone owners in the United States are interested in buying the company's new Apple Watch, according to a new Reuters/Ipsos poll.

The high-tech smartwatch, which will range in price from \$350 to \$17,000 for an 18-karat gold model, is Apple Inc's first major new product in five years and consumer demand for the device is being closely watched by competitors and investors.

Owners of the iPhone are a particularly important market for Apple as it launches the new watch, which goes on sale April 24. Because the watch needs an iPhone to work fully, analysts say the most likely pool of initial buyers will already have an Apple smartphone in their pockets.

BTIG analyst Walter Piecyk said that with more than 100 million active iPhone users in the United States and closer to half a billion globally, the survey was "pretty encouraging" for a product that has not been seen in shops, even if was unclear how much of the interest would translate into purchases.

Pacific Crest Securities analyst Andrew Hargreaves said it was not clear how many people wanted or needed a smartwatch. But he expected Apple's cache and marketing might to deliver strong initial sales of the Apple Watch.

"Winning Apple customers is more realistic at this point," said Hargreaves.

The watch allows users to check email, listen to music and make phone calls.

Ipsos surveyed 2,469 Americans aged 18 and older online between March 9 and March 17 and found that 24 percent expressed an interest in purchasing the Apple Watch, including 10 percent of those describing themselves as "very interested."



Syed Manzur Elahi, chairman of Apex Footwear, and Syed Nasim Manzur, managing director, pose with the employees at a programme to mark the company's silver jubilee at its factory in Shafipur on Monday.

Apex Footwear celebrates silver jubilee

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Apex Footwear has celebrated 25 years of its operations with a programme at the company's factory in Shafipur on Monday.

Syed Manzur Elahi, chairman of Apex Footwear; Syed Nasim Manzur, managing director; Munize Manzur, director, and Golam Mainuddin, independent director

of Apex and chairman of British American Tobacco Bangladesh, were present at the event, the company said in a statement yesterday.

Apex Footwear is a leading manufacturer and exporter of leather footwear to major shoe retailers in Western Europe, North America and Japan.

It earned \$138.5 million in revenue in 2013, according to the company website.



Iqbal Hossain, director of PHP Family in Bangladesh, and Abdul Harith Bin Abdullah, chief executive officer of Proton Holdings of Malaysia, exchange documents of an agreement at Proton's headquarters on March 12. PHP will assemble Proton cars in Bangladesh -- to be called 'Proton PHP'. Mahathir Mohamad, chairman of Proton, and Sufi Mohammed Mizanur Rahman, chairman of PHP, were also present.



Habibur Rahman, deputy managing director of Prime Bank, and Muhammad Munir Chowdhury, company secretary of Dhaka Power Distribution Company, sign a deal for online bill collection at a programme at DPDC's head office in Dhaka on Thursday. Ahmed Kamal Khan Chowdhury, managing director of Prime Bank, was also present.

Danish minister calls for more focus on worker rights

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On the inflow of foreign investment and current political unrest, the minister said: "It's crucial to obtain one thing; the investors look for political stability."

The political situation needs to be improved, not just for the sake of investors, but also the people of Bangladesh, he added.

"And of course it is crucial for me to say that the Danish experience when it comes to developing our country is that it needs full democracy with media freedom, press freedom, freedom of speech, the freedom to assemble, freedom for NGOs to work, which are very essential to developing society," Jensen said.

Sometimes it is annoying for the government when the media and NGOs become critical about the government, he added.

On media freedom and democracy, he said the fundamentals of the Danish development policy are human rights. "So every partner country we work with, we raise the questions of human rights."

He has discussed the human rights issue with the Bangladesh government and his government will take a programme for the next three years to make improvements.

The minister recognised the fulfilment of major conditions given by the United States Trade Representative and the Sustainability Compact that was signed by the government in Geneva in 2013, with the European Union involving the International Labour Organisation to commit responsible business behaviour.

Jensen lauded the labour law amendment, recruitment of more than 200 additional factory inspectors, completion of preliminary inspection of more than 2,000 factories by the Accord and Alliance, registration of more than 236 trade unions and launch of a publicly accessible database on garment factories and a telephone helpline for the workers.

Jensen, who also travelled to different parts of the country to see the progress of projects financed by Danish International Development Agency, said more than a million people have been given access to safe water and one million farmers have been given assistance by the agency so far since 1972.

On trade between the two countries, he said Denmark has a great trade deficit with Bangladesh and it is interested in investing in renewable energy and the water sector.

Currently, 60 Danish companies are in operation in Bangladesh. He suggested developing the leather and ship building industries, as those have good potential.

Will that be all, sir? Butler business booms in China

AFP, Chengdu, China

Hands sheathed in white gloves, Alvin Hu's dream of serving as butler to China's growing ranks of super-rich faced an unlikely challenge: a dinner plate piled high with multicoloured toy bricks.

China's only foreign-run butler school opened last year, riding the coat-tails of increasing demand for the trappings of European-style old money in the Communist-ruled country, even as its economic boom slows.

Students at the International Butler Academy are drilled daily on everything from ironing perfect creases into tablecloths, polishing silverware, and the correct cutlery to accompany an eight-course banquet.

"In the whole world there are more and more rich people. And especially in China, they want someone to take care of the smaller things," said Hu, one of dozens of students who have enrolled in the school's six-week courses, which cost 40,000 yuan (\$6,500).

In an exercise designed to test the steadiness of his hand, Hu steered a platter of plastic toys representing food towards his seated Swiss instructor, who furrowed his brow as plastic balls standing in for dinner careened in front of him.

"Thank you," the instructor offered, after Hu used a silver knife and spoon to ferry an oversized brick onto his plate.

A butler can typically expect to earn 20,000 yuan (\$3,200) a month, according to Hu, making the course a worthwhile investment.

China is home to more than a million people with assets above \$1.6 million, according to wealth publisher Hurun, with numbers expected to swell in coming years.

The country's elite have employed servants for centuries -- with some, such as the eunuchs of the Imperial court, enjoying high status and power of

their own -- but screen representations of British-style butlers have lent them a new aura of luxury.

"In the last few years the demand for butlers has become bigger and bigger. So it's logical for us to have teachers here," said Thomas Kaufmann, head instructor at the school. "It's easier to train a Chinese in the butler trade than it is to train a Western butler in Chinese language and culture."

Butlers have a long history in Western books and films, from Jules Verne's *Passepartout* and PG Wodehouse's *Jeeves and Alfred* from the *Batman* movie franchise, but it is *Downton Abbey's* Carson who has stoked appetites in China.

"*Downton Abbey* is so famous here in China, that's the standard we are measured at," said Kaufmann.

The Academy, in the southwestern city of Chengdu, is Dutch-run but partly backed by a Chinese real-estate firm -- reflecting the growing number of Chinese housing developments offering butler services to potential homeowners as the property market becomes tougher.

A short stroll away, a billboard for a new housing estate shows a grinning man in a suit and bow tie, promising to bring "the elegance of British butlering service into everyday life".

Pu Yan, a spokeswoman for developer Langji Real Estate told AFP: "We provide a butler for each private villa. Our customers have been very happy."

Shi Chunming, a founder of rival Chinese firm Sinobutler said he had recently signed "several cooperation agreements with real-estate firms".

An index of new home prices in 100 major cities fell for eight consecutive months last year, but the downturn has proved a surprising boon for the school, according to Kaufmann.

"Now that selling apartments has become more challenging, companies have to provide more services for the tenants, who are also demanding more," he said. "That's actually pretty good for us."

But the phenomenon has been accompanied by cases of fly-by-night butlers, who are trained to serve in property developers' showrooms to lure customers -- in instances of false advertising.

"Once the sales office is closed, the butlers disappear," he said.

The school is based in a villa decked out to resemble the kind of luxury home students hope to work in after graduation.

Each morning's classes start with a round of dusting, cleaning and polishing, and the positioning of a water-jug can provoke ferocious debate -- while a butter-knife laid a centimetre out of place can lead to failure.

Students laying a banquet table crouched and squinted to gauge the precise spacing of rows of forks, whipping out rulers to make sure the distances were correct.

But not to Kaufmann's exacting standards. "How can you put cutlery down like this?" he demanded. "Why? Are you not listening? You did not measure. You have to measure!"

Chinese student Chrissy Yan -- butlering is no longer a male preserve -- said the training "can be hard, especially the table-laying", as cutlery rattled in the background.

But her ambitions were undaunted. "I want to lead a team of Chinese butlers which will be known worldwide, and asked to travel the world," she said.

Once employed, butlers' duties include more mundane tasks such as "fetching groceries, walking the dog, organising cleaning staff, polishing furniture and shoes", said Kaufmann.

Like most students, Hu is young but spent several years butlering for the likes of US casino magnate Steve Wynn, where he said his tasks included wiping fingerprints from his boss' mobile phone and picking out his favourite variety of chocolate from assortment packs.

BB rolls out rewards for good borrowers

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"Although the profits of banks will reduce to some extent because of the policy, we will still welcome it," Khan told The Daily Star, adding that the policy might help bring a positive change in reversing the growing trend of wilful default culture.

Now banks will have to make their customers aware about the incentives for being a good borrower, he added.

Yahoo shutting down its office in China

AFP, Shanghai

US Internet company Yahoo is shutting down its presence in China, it said, with reports saying at least 200 people will be laid off. The closure of the research centre in Beijing office will eliminate 200 to 300 jobs, Bloomberg reported Wednesday, quoting a person familiar with the matter.

The California-based firm's move contrasts with other Internet companies, which are courting the world's biggest online population despite authorities blocking their products.

Twitter opened an office in Hong Kong this month, while Facebook CEO Mark

Zuckerberg addressed a Beijing university audience in Chinese last year.

Yahoo confirmed the closure in a statement to AFP, but did not specify how many employees would be affected.

"We are constantly making changes to align resources and to foster better collaboration and innovation across our business," the statement said. "We will be consolidating certain functions into fewer offices, including to our headquarters in Sunnyvale, California."

The decision follows Yahoo's announcement in January that it will spin off its stake in Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba.

Target agrees to pay \$10m to settle lawsuit from data breach

REUTERS, Washington

Target Corp has agreed to pay \$10 million in a proposed settlement of a class-action lawsuit related to a huge 2013 data breach that consumers say compromised their personal financial information, court documents show.

Under the proposal, which requires federal court approval, Target will deposit the settlement amount into an interest-bearing escrow account, to pay individual victims up to \$10,000 in damages.

The claims will be submitted and processed primarily online through a dedicated website, according to the court documents.

The proposal also requires Target to adopt and implement data security measures such as appointing a chief information security officer and maintaining a written information security program.

"We are pleased to see the process moving forward and look forward to its resolution," said Target spokeswoman Molly Snyder.

Factories disappear into thin air after taking duty benefits

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"It appears that these companies have misused the zero-duty import benefit and sold the imported raw materials in the local market," he said, asking not to be named.

The CBC began inspections amid allegations that a section of the firms misuse the bonded warehouse facilities and deprive the country of revenues.

The malpractice also hurts businesses that import the same raw materials by paying duty and taxes for marketing in the domestic market.

The revenue administration provides bond licenses to export-oriented firms in sectors such as apparel, leather and shipbuilding.



Sheikh Nasir Uddin, chairman of Akij Group, exchanges documents of a knowledge-sharing deal on behalf of Dhaka Tobacco Industries with Adonis Fineza, country manager of Japan Tobacco International Bangladesh, at Radisson hotel in Dhaka yesterday.