

No Amazon? No problem for Pakistan's e-commerce pioneers

AFP, Islamabad

For Shayaan Tahir, it all began when an order he placed on Amazon for a new iPod was rejected because the online giant would not deliver electronics to Pakistan.

Frustrated, he decided to take matters into his own hands and founded one of Pakistan's first e-commerce ventures -- a sector that today is booming.

That was seven years ago. Like thousands of other young Pakistanis, Tahir was working at a call centre in the city of Karachi, the country's violent, freewheeling economic hub located on the Arabian sea.

He had saved hard to buy himself an iPod -- only to have his purchase blocked. He enlisted a cousin in the United States to send him three of Apple's music players. Tahir kept one and sold the other two via classified ads.

And that was when the idea hit him: to create his own Amazon-like site for Pakistan, a country of almost 200 million people that has been all but forgotten by the web giants ubiquitous in the West.

Amazon, for example, can only sell limited products to Pakistan via its British site, at a hefty mark-up.

"Once I realised I cannot buy anything from Amazon... I realised that if I cannot get it and I want something from Amazon then there might be others like me who want the same product," said Tahir, 29.

He launch Homeshopping.pk, an online commerce site that today deals with 500 transactions per day and employees 65 people.

Products are delivered within 24 hours inside Pakistan, and the business primarily takes cash on delivery because most people do not have credit cards. More recently the site began accepting online bank transfers.

Despite some security concerns and a



Right, Shayaan Tahir, CEO of Homeshopping.pk, speaks to a customer at his call centre in Karachi, Pakistan.

handful of customers who refused to pay for an item once it had been delivered, it's a formula that has so far worked.

Other young entrepreneurs have followed Tahir and today there is a host of online shops selling everything from consumer goods -- shophive.com and daraz.pk -- to real estate -- zameen.com -- and even cars -- pakwheels.com.

Pakistan is better known abroad for its violent attacks by Taliban militants, but these entrepreneurs are more focussed on its 30 million Internet users, roughly 15 percent of the population.

The total volume of online sales was around \$35 million last year, according to industry officials -- a tiny fraction of the sales seen by global giant Amazon, Alibaba

in China or Flipkart in neighbouring India. But experts agree there is potential.

The arrival last year of 3G and 4G mobile networks -- years behind other emerging markets -- has proved a further boon to online commerce in the country.

"Basically the 30 million could be 100 million in the next few years," said Shaun Di Gregorio, CEO of Frontier Digital Ventures, a venture capital fund based in Malaysia that recently invested in Zameen.com and Pakwheels.com.

"In order to surf, you need a wave, and the wave is here," added Frenchman Gilles Blanchard, co-founder of the site Seloger.com who has invested in Pakistani startup Zameen.com.

Di Gregorio and Blanchard are among

the foreign investors who are hoping to cash in ahead of any move by the global giants to acquire local companies.

"When Amazon and Alibaba come in ... they would not want to build anything from scratch. It's going to take too much time," said Muneeb Maayr, co-founder of the site Daraz.pk, which sees around 1,000 sales per day.

His goal is for his firm to one day be acquired by one of the foreign behemoths.

For now, young Pakistani entrepreneurs are battling among themselves for market share, said Maayr, a former investment banker at Bear Stearns.

The rivalry is pushing sites to offer better services and driving up the number of customers, observers say.

Lagos uses beach polo to hook investors to 'Dubai of Africa'

AFP, Lagos

Porsches and Jaguars are parked in the sand while businessmen and their partners, in high heels and hats, sit in the sheltered grandstands, glass of champagne in hand.

The scene could be Dubai or Miami but this is Lagos -- Nigeria's biggest city and financial hub -- and the first beach polo tournament in Africa.

Hundreds of kilometres from fighting between the Islamist group Boko Haram and the Nigerian Army and a week before closely fought elections, entertainment is the name of the game.

Teams of three and their mounts, instead of four as in traditional polo, compete on a sandy polo ground slightly smaller than the classic grass version.

"Beach polo is similar to arena polo," said Habeeb Fasinro, president of the Lagos Polo Club, which was set up in 1904 under British colonial rule.

"It is usually played off season, when you're not playing on grass, just to keep the horses in shape," he told AFP, still dressed in his white trousers and leather riding boots after one game.

"But now it's turned into something very big. You have the world beach polo tournament as well in Miami, you have it in Dubai, in Ibiza."

The competition, which finishes on Sunday, has been organised on the vast stretch of sand known as Eko Atlantic, which is currently the biggest real estate building site in Africa.

Work began in 2008 to drag millions of tonnes of sand from the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean to create a 10 square kilometre (3.86 square mile) city within a city.

Developers predict that when it is complete in the next 15 to 20 years it will be "the Dubai of Africa" and accommodate some 250,000 people.

The first two buildings are currently being built. Roads, bridges, street lights and even small palm trees have also emerged on the sand, which is annexed to the upmarket area of Victoria Island.

"The idea was to start to create a bit of activity in this new city," said Ronald Chagoury Junior, vice-president of Eko Atlantic, who admits to liking the parallels with Dubai.



Christine Lagarde

Lagarde says IMF to co-operate with China-led AIIB bank

BBC NEWS

International Monetary Fund chief Christine Lagarde has said the IMF would be "delighted" to co-operate with the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

The AIIB has more than 30 members and is envisaged as a development bank similar to the World Bank.

Lagarde said there was "massive" room for IMF co-operation with the AIIB on infrastructure financing.

The US has criticised the UK and other allies for supporting the bank. The US sees the AIIB as a rival to the World Bank, and as a lever for Beijing to extend its influence in the region.

The White House has also said it hopes the UK will use "its voice to push for adoption of high standards".

Countries have until 31 March to decide whether to seek membership of the AIIB. As well as the UK, other nations backing the venture include New Zealand, Germany, Italy and France. Lagarde, speaking at the opening of the China Development Forum in Beijing, also said she believed that the World Bank would co-operate with the AIIB.

Economic emergence: the potential of fair African development

AFP, Abidjan

Across Africa, where many nations show high economic growth rates but with little benefit to their populations, the notion of social and economic "emergence" is taking hold as a remedy for perennial pessimism.

The term has become a buzzword among international donors and African politicians who take it to mean a fairer distribution of wealth and other measures that benefit society at large.

About 30 countries on the continent have signed up to the doctrine, according to the United Nations. Ivory Coast's President Alassane Ouattara, who hosted a regional conference on the theme this week, has grabbed on to the promise of economic emergence as he plans to seek re-election in October.

Emergence, modelled on the success of the "baby tigers" of Asia -- Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam -- as well as Brazil, Chile and Colombia in South America, is presented as the opposite of a capitalist and dehumanised economic vision.

"For me, the goal of emergence is not GDP (gross domestic product) growth per se: it is the pursuit of greater human health and happiness so that each one of us can fulfil our potential and participate fully in our societies," said Helen Clark, administrator for the UN Development Programme.

Ivory Coast, the world's leading cocoa producer, barely four years ago came out of a political and military crisis after a bloody decade. It has since achieved an annual growth rate of 9.0 percent and is due to be an "emerging" economy by 2020, Ouattara told the conference, though the Ivorian opposition considers that goal far-fetched.

Leaders elsewhere in Africa are less ambitious but equally determined. Chad was aiming to emerge in 2020 but has revised the date to 2030, like Togo. More cautiously, Senegal's rulers are looking to 2035 to attain key goals.

"In addition to being strong and sustainable, the growth that leads us to emerge should generate jobs, force down unemployment and reduce social inequalities," Senegalese President Macky Sall said during the forum.

The UN's Clark envisaged that "by 2050, an 'emergent Africa' would have tripled Africa's share of global GDP, enabled 1.4 billion Africans to join the middle class, and reduced tenfold the number of people living in extreme poverty. These are exciting prospects."

Investment in health and education and reducing inequalities between cities and the countryside and between men and women, along with diversifying the economy and appropriate infrastructure projects, are



Senegalese President Macky Sall delivers a speech at the opening of the "International Conference on the Emergence of Africa", in Abidjan, Ivory Coast on March 18.

among means cited by experts to reach emergent targets.

On a continent where 300 million inhabitants were considered middle-class citizens by the African Development Bank (ADB) in 2011, out of an overall population of around one billion, "Afro-pessimism is now giving way to optimism," Ivory Coast's Planning Minister Albert Toikeusse Mabri asserted. "The African narrative has changed. Just a while ago, Africa was a place which was exceptional, but for negative reasons. It was a place where there was no growth, no law," said ADB vice-president Steve Kayizzi-Mugerwa.

"People would say, 'Yeah, that's Africa', where there was war, quick death, no accountability," he said, before adding how things have changed. "We can no longer blame it on geography, we can no longer blame it on disease, we can no longer blame it on the colonial legacy, because many people have emerged," the ADB official said, though conflict rages in Somalia and South Sudan and parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Kenya and more recently, Ivory Coast, have sparked a more positive outlook on the continent, impressing the financial community with their success in development terms. "Emergence is a bet on the future," declared UNDP regional director Abdoulaye Mar Dieye. The ideas discussed at the conference mean that "economic growth without social benefits isn't inevitable", said Makhtar Diop, vice-president of the World Bank for Africa, adding that the "redistribution of wealth" was vital for "social wellbeing".

However, participants pointed out that emergent development is hampered by undue dependence on a single resource, like Nigeria and Angola which rely on their oil exports. Massive corruption and a lack of economic integration are also barriers to success.

Capital flight costs Africa between 60 and 100 billion dollars a year, said Dieye of the UNDP. "With good governance, you see what could be injected back into African economies."



Jahangir Bin Alam, chief executive of India-Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry, speaks at the first steering committee meeting of South Asia Economic conclave organised by the Confederation of Indian Industry in Delhi recently.

Founder Wang takes over as CEO as Taiwan's HTC seeks turnaround

REUTERS, Taipei

HTC Corp on Friday named Cher Wang as chief executive, giving its founder and chairwoman a bigger role in leading a potential turnaround of the Taiwanese smartphone maker.

The return of Wang, a scion of one of Taiwan's most prominent families, comes as HTC's phones have often struggled to translate positive early reviews into strong sales, and the former contract manufacturer has found it tough to build a strong consumer brand in a competitive market. HTC said Wang has been increasingly involved in running various aspects of the business.

She replaces Peter Chou, who will lead product development as head of the HTC Future Development Lab, an executive role focusing on identifying future growth opportunities.



The Centre of Excellence for Leather Skill Bangladesh (COEL) organised an international training programme on footwear designing, at COEL Centre in Kaliakoir, Gazipur on Wednesday. The workshop is supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.