

Bangladesh will march forward with tech advancement: Hasina

UNB, Dhaka

Bangladesh will step forward keeping up the tempo with the modern technologies that will emerge in the days to come, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said yesterday.

She spoke at a programme organised to mark the World Telecommunication and Information Society Day 2015 and to observe the 150th anniversary of the International Telecommunication Union.

Post and Telecommunications Division and Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission jointly organised the event at Bangabandhu International Conference Centre in the capital.

The government is working to realise the dream of establishing Digital Bangladesh, as people now can avail various public services digitally on their doorsteps, Hasina said.

The government has been developing ICT infrastructure in the country to provide the common people with better services, she said.

The government has also reduced internet cost to its lowest at Tk 612 from Tk 27,000 per

mbps, as there is no alternative to making it easily available to ensure free flow of information, she said.

Now over 4.56 crore people are using internet in Bangladesh while over 12.47 crore mobile connections are being used across the country, increasing internet penetration to 27.42 percent from 2.5 percent in the last six years, the prime minister said.

People can now pay utility bills, get results of various public examinations and complete admission processes of various educational institutions through the internet and mobile phones in their hands, she said.

Also, 3G network has already been introduced in the country to increase internet speed; and the government is working to launch 4G network soon, the premier said.

Tele-density has increased by 2.5 times to 80 percent, while 99 percent area of the country has been brought under mobile network coverage, she said.

She said steps have also been taken to connect Bangladesh with the second submarine cable to increase internet capacity to 1,300gbps while

capacity of existing submarine cable has been increased to 200gbps to meet growing local demand.

"I hope that the work of the second submarine cable will be completed within December 2016."

Hasina said the government has introduced a national web portal with 25,000 websites of various public organisations.

She narrated that e-commerce, e-transaction, e-banking and other activities on trade and commerce as well as e-signature and communication through video conferencing have been started in various organisations, enabling work to be completed faster and more effectively.

Talking about the country's own satellite, the prime minister said the government is working on launching the Bangabandhu Satellite into the orbit in 2017.

Earlier, she distributed prizes among the winners of an online essay competition on telecommunication and ICT.

She also released a commemorative postage stamp on the occasion.

India looks to form a common South Asian market

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Previously, Bangladeshi trucks could not enter the two countries as there was no agreement in place with India for using its land for traffic movement, he said.

There will be many makeshift markets along the India and Bangladesh bordering lines so that the people of those areas can have market access as well.

At present, there are three such makeshift markets in operations along the adjoining areas of the two countries.

He said the Indian secretary demanded duty-free export of 225 items under the South Asian Free Trade Area (Safta) regime. The country has already extended duty benefits to 23 of the items. The meeting with Ahmed yesterday concluded Kher's two-day visit to the country.

Earlier on Sunday, at another commerce secretary level meeting, Kher demanded reduction of duty on exports of pomegranate and orange from India and permission to set up pasteurised milk factories in Bangladesh.

At the secretary level meeting, the Indian side agreed to accept Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution's (BSTI) certification of 25 items for export to India, mainly dairy and food products.

India will also consider removal of 12.5 percent countervailing duty (CVD), a domestic tax to protect the local industry, on export of Bangladeshi garment items to India.

They also agreed to consider the removal of trade barriers on export and use of jute bags from Bangladesh.

The neighbouring country also agreed not to stop the export of some essential commodities like cotton to Bangladesh without prior notice.

The balance of bilateral trade between the two countries is heavily tilted towards India. Exports to India declined 19 percent year-on-year to \$456.63 million in fiscal 2013-14 mainly due to a slowdown in shipment of garment items that enjoy duty benefits in the neighbouring market.

In fiscal 2012-13, exports to India totalled \$563.97 million, according to the Export Promotion Bureau.

Import from India stood at \$6.04 billion in fiscal 2013-14 and \$4.78 billion the year before, according to data from the commerce ministry.

It is believed products worth another \$5 billion enter Bangladesh through informal channels.

PPP schemes can fix many problems of developing nations

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PPP can be used for big infrastructure projects and social initiatives to channel private funds to public purposes, said HK Yong, senior fellow of Malaysia's Institute of Strategic and International Studies.

He made the suggestion as overseas development assistance or aid flow from developed countries to developing world is waning.

Developed countries had earlier committed to provide 0.7 percent of their gross national income as ODA to help developing nations finance their development needs. However, many of the countries are yet to meet their full commitments.

Yong said net overseas development assistance from OECD's (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) Development Assistance Committee members stood at \$135.2 billion in 2014, which was just 0.29 percent of the GNIs of the countries that year. In 2014, only 5 of the OECD DAC members had met their targets, he said.

Arastoo Khan, member of the Planning Commission, however, said the South should continue to give emphasis on ODA while looking for alternative sources of financing.

He stressed the need for engaging the private sector, increased domestic revenue mobilisation, raising funds from capital markets and community financing to attain future development agenda.

JM Pathania, director of India's Directorate of Urban Development, said money is not the issue; rather, capacity, technology and knowledge are needed more than funding.

"The problem is that money does not properly reach the beneficiaries," he added.

At another session on new opportunities in the South-South and Tripartite Financing for Development, Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad, chairman of Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation, said ODA must continue for the least-developed and low-income countries.

South-South cooperation will be complementary to ODA, he said, adding that cooperation should be increased for financial mobilisation, exchange of information and knowledge. In recent years, South-South trade has surpassed North-South flows: approximately 56 percent of the exports from developing countries went to other developing countries in 2011.

Foreign direct investment flows among developing countries are also on the rise, with some middle-income economies in the south going on to become sources of development assistance, according to a paper circulated at the session.

However, the benefits of South-South cooperation are not evenly distributed across the countries and sectors in the south.

The numerous tools and examples of South-South Cooperation remain underutilised, it said.

Atiur Rahman, governor of Bangladesh Bank, said cooperation among developing countries is needed to curb fund outflows through trade mis-invoicing and misuse of transfer pricing, as the amount of illicit outflows is more than ODA and FDI in the developing world.

He said the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) should help countries like Bangladesh develop bond market, especially an offshore one, to raise funds especially from the Bangladeshis living abroad and foreigners to invest in infrastructure projects.

Discussions also said the formation of AIIB and BRICS Development Bank will play a big role as alternative financing source for developing countries.

They also focused on empowering people in the true sense as well as capacity building and resource mobilisation, so that Southern countries can turn conditionality, attached by mainly multilateral lenders, in favour of their national interests.

State Minister for Finance MA Mannan and State Minister for Finance and Economic Development of Ethiopia Ahmed Shide spoke among others.

Act fast to take advantage of large youth population

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Bangladesh is already half way through the period of its demographic dividend, according to the report.

The country has another 16 years to reap the benefits of demographic dividend.

Demographic dividend is defined as the economic growth potential that can result from shifts in a population's age structure, mainly when the share of the working-age population (15-59 years age) is larger than those of the non-working-age share. Such a scenario helps a country cut spending on dependents and spur economic growth.

After 2031, there will be an acceleration in the numbers of the elderly (60 years and above) for Bangladesh.

If the benefits of demographic dividend are attained, the per capita income will rise with more people now being economically active and the savings rate will also increase.

As people grow older they will tend to save and invest more to provide financial security in their old age, which will result in the accumulation of wealth and investment capital and in turn creation of a second demographic dividend.

"This benefit can be maximised if the incentives are provided for people to accumulate savings during their working lives."

What steps the country takes to capitalise on the remaining demographic dividend duration will be crucial in determining whether Bangladesh can enter the ranks of the middle-income countries or not, it said.

The report called for focus on human resource development by way of greater investment in schooling and technical training.

"In Bangladesh, this implies a much greater effort by the government and its development partners

to ensure that young people complete a full course of quality secondary education, and if possible to go beyond secondary school to technical and vocational training," the report said.

"During all technical discussions and financial negotiations it is easy to lose track of what or whom we are actually talking about. But it is people we are speaking about," Argentina Matavel Piccin, UNFPA representative to Bangladesh, said.

"There is one group especially, which stands out and which we should pay special attention to and that is adolescents and youth, who UNFPA sees as agents of development."

The report said there is a need for capital investment in infrastructure, improved technology, revolution of agriculture, the machinery of manufacturing, trade policy and market liberalisation.

It also called for quality and affordable health care for all.

"We have to create the right opportunity for the youth," Lefranc said.

Bellal Hossain, a professor at Dhaka University, said the country must produce qualified and skilled workers, as demanded by the industries.

Barkat-e-Khuda, a professor of economics at Dhaka University, said the country needs to raise its spending on education and health sectors to make its working age population healthy and more productive.

Rushidan Islam Rahman, a research director at Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, expressed concern over the fall of women participation in the labour market.

She also said: "We will have to make the agriculture sector attractive for the youth, so that they don't make exodus to the manufacturing and services sectors."

Salman Zaidi, lead economist of the World Bank's Dhaka office, said Bangladesh has already started reaping the benefits of demographic dividend in the labour-intensive sectors such as garments, as investors are gradually moving out of China.

"However, there are other areas, such as shipbuilding, pharmaceuticals and leather, where Bangladesh can replicate the success."

Bellal Hossain also said the government has not invested a lot in vocational training and technical education as it did in case of general education.

Consequently, the country lacks the capacity to absorb about the 2 million people that are joining the workforce every year.

The report said taking advantage of the second demographic dividend will require policies to promote both individual savings and creation of a sovereign wealth fund to ensure that economic growth continues as the population ages.

The GED prepared the 'Demographic Impact Study' (DIS) report as part of its preparation to map out the 7th Five Year Plan (fiscal 2015-16 to 2019-20).

At the closing ceremony of the two-day meeting, developing countries reiterated their calls to the rich nations to not renege on their commitments of official assistance to spur growth in Global South and lift millions of people out of poverty.

"International financial institutions need to address the financing needs of the developing countries, although the developing countries have substantially increased their domestic resource mobilisation," said Muhith.

"If the developed economies honour their official development assistance commitments, it would be easy for the developing countries

to grow," he said, while calling on the private sector to play its part.

Robert Watkins, UN resident coordinator and UNDP resident representative in Bangladesh, said the South-South Cooperation is important for achieving economic growth, fostering trade and commerce, creating jobs and ensuring regional stability.

"Without economic growth, there will be no economic development, and this economic development has to be equally distributed."

Both Watkins and Yiping Zhou, envoy of the UN Secretary-General for South-South Cooperation, highly praised Bangladesh's achievement in Millennium Development Goals.

Zhou further said: "We have found solutions to Sustainable Development Goals in Bangladesh."

Foreign Affairs Minister Abul Hassan Mahmood Ali said the challenges facing the developing countries vary from country to country. "Their needs have to be kept in mind."

Apart from trade, developing countries can foster cooperation in areas of health, climate change and skills development, he said.

The minister also said the developed countries just cannot shy away from respecting their commitments of development assistance for the developing and vulnerable countries.

The two-day meeting was organised by the Economic Relations Division in partnership with the United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation and the United Nations Development Programme.

More than 240 representatives from 45 countries took part in the meeting. Recommendations from the meetings will be forwarded to its next meeting in Addis Ababa due in July for final adoption.

Entire country to come under 3G coverage: GP

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In his first interview with the media in his five and a half months in Bangladesh, the CEO said, "Political turmoil in the first couple of months of the year was my main challenge, which impacted us a lot. Our revenue declined and the country's economy was also being affected, and hopefully we are overcoming it."

In the last quarter of 2014, Grameenphone's total revenue was Tk 2,590 crore; it declined 1 percent to Tk 2,520 crore in the January-March quarter of 2015.

On the uncertainties over the upcoming spectrum auction, he said Grameenphone needs additional spectrum to offer better services, but it might shun the auction as some issues are not settled yet.

Until its demands -- resolving the SIM replacement tax issue and allowing technology neutrality -- are met, Grameenphone will not participate in the auction for additional 2G and 3G spectrum, Sethi said.

"The way we are experiencing growth of data and keeping our vision of 'internet for all' in mind, we will need more spectrum in the coming years."

The government has decided to sell the remaining spectrum of 1,800 MHz for 2G services and 2,100 MHz for 3G services. The government could earn \$648 million if all the spectrum blocks are sold at the base prices.

When asked whether the industry would face a loss if the auction is called off, Sethi said they need spectrum to offer better services to their customers; so if the

auction is called off, it will be a loss for the users as well.

"Increasing the use of internet adds value to the economy, which may suffer."

The BTRC had initially set an auction date for April 30 but rescheduled it twice to May 20 and May 27, as the mobile operators did not apply within the stipulated time.

To ensure the best service quality, they will also need technology neutrality for the efficient use of those spectrums and a long-term roadmap for the industry, he added.

If the government allows the use of any band of spectrum for any technology, then the mobile operators can use their spectrum efficiently, he said.

"We don't know what kind of service we can offer and a roadmap needs to make it clear, which will also be helpful for the investors in making their plans."

On allowing one more mobile phone operator in the market, Sethi said there is already intense competition in the market with six operators, and 80 percent penetration has been achieved.

In response to allegations of a higher number of call drops and poor voice quality, he said, "GP is a company that stands for better service quality for years now. I believe we are well above the industry standards in service quality."

But sometimes the users might think differently."

The operator invested Tk 1,270 crore in 2013, Tk 1,530 crore in 2014, and Tk 370 crore in the first three months this year, to roll out 3G and boost 2G capacity and efficiency, according to its financial report.

Electricity shortages hobble South Africa growth

AFP, Johannesburg

Power outages are the biggest brake on South Africa's economic growth, the country's Finance Minister Nhlanhla Nene said Monday, as factories, homes and offices across the country continue to suffer from long electricity cuts.

South Africa is forecast to grow at two percent this year, far below the rate needed to ease high unemployment and growing frustration among many young blacks more than two decades after the end of apartheid.

"The most pressing risk facing us at the moment is the energy generation," Nene told foreign correspondents at a briefing in Johannesburg.

82pc of population yet to use internet

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He was speaking at an event held to mark World Telecommunication Day observed on May 17 every year. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina inaugurated the programme.

Bangladesh's adaptation to the digital era is quite fast, but policy reforms and regulations need to be more specific and young entrepreneur-centric, analysts said.

The voice use of bandwidth has grown almost three-fold to 15.35 Gbps by the end of last year from 2008, when it was just 4.96 Gbps.

The telecom industry generates almost \$3 billion in annual revenue which is almost 2.5 percent of the GDP, said M Rokunuzzaman, professor of ECE department of North South University.

Once the telecom service was a monopoly of the state-owned BTCL, but even after privatisation some telecoms are operating in a near-monopoly market due to lack of proper government control and suitable regulations, he added.

Experts also spoke on innovation in the ICT and telecom sector as well as content and application development.



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