

# Ideas in e-services take students to China

ROBIN GAZI, back from Shenzhen

IT started out as just a notice on a board at their university faculties, asking for solutions on how to enrich people's lives through e-services, with an opportunity to visit China and get training at the Huawei headquarters in Shenzhen in southeastern China. The Huawei 'Seeds for the Future' corporate social responsibility programme creates the platform.

Ten students were selected from universities across the country after they had showcased their ideas, which were nothing short of brilliant.

One of the ideas was on disseminating educational material among people in the rural areas who have no access to the internet. Files would be shared over whatever network protocol available and it would be done through something very similar to the bittorrent protocol, an efficient way of transferring files.

There would be parity data stored on every device so that everyone could have the complete file even if the uploader goes offline. The upshot to this is that there would be no central control or server, said Yeasin Ar Rahman, a student of the computer science and engineering department of Chittagong University of Engineering and Technology.

Another idea was rather simple, yet it could be complicated to execute. Creating a central database of everyone's health records, so that patients would not have to carry huge files to and from the doctors and hospitals. Instead, they could carry an ID card that would give access to hospital records.

In case of an emergency, patient history would be at the finger tips of the attending doctors. Sajid Mahmud, a third-year student of the electrical and electronic engineering department of Dhaka University, who came up with the idea, does not care who gets the job done as long as it gets done.

And there was the idea of Tasnim Faika, who just graduated from the electronics and



Bangladeshi students along with Khairul Anam, public relations manager of Huawei Technologies, pose at their presentation on Bangladesh at the closing ceremony of Seeds for the Future programme on Huawei campus in Shenzhen, China, on Friday.

communication technology department of Khulna University of Engineering and Technology. She had the idea of building a phone operating system using Braille and voice for the visually impaired.

Tired of seeing people getting killed at level crossings in the country, Parash Chakma, a fourth-year student of electrical and electronic engineering department of Chittagong University of Engineering and Technology, came up with an idea of using GPS and mobile network to automate the gates at level crossings and drastically reduce the number of accidents.

They, along with five others who went

to China from Bangladesh, went to Beijing first and had the opportunity to visit the Great Wall, the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square, to observe Chinese culture and its history. They even attended a five-day crash course on mandarin during their visit to China from September 5 to September 19.

They were then flown to Shenzhen where they had classes and lab practice on 3G and 4G technology on mobile communication.

Blown away by the equipment Huawei had at their disposal to show them how things should be done in the communication sector, the students were more or less

unanimous in saying that Bangladesh had a dearth of sources of such knowledge that they had acquired in Shenzhen.

"We are grateful to Huawei for giving us such an opportunity to learn all these things. We would not have been able to get this knowledge without Huawei's cooperation. This would be of utmost importance after our graduation because we dream of a Digital Bangladesh for which technical advancement is a must," said Parash Chakma of CUET.

He said their teachers could have used some of the things they learnt there and pass them on to students in their classes.

## With iPhone launch, Apple eyes better customer connection

AFP, Washington

It's not just another iPhone launch. This time, Apple is pushing not only a new device, but what it says is a new relationship with its customers.

By offering for the first time monthly installment payments on direct sales and a new lease option for US customers, Apple is moving to help break the stranglehold of mobile carriers as it launches its new iPhones on Friday.

The program comes with US carriers largely moving away from the model in which the smartphone is offered at a subsidized price in exchange for a two-year contract, unlike most markets around the world where consumers pay upfront for a device.

This means the price of the iPhone -- \$650 and up -- is no longer hidden in monthly service fees, creating a challenge for the maker of the high-end smartphone.

Apple is meeting the challenge head-on by offering to finance the phone for as little as \$27 per month, or allow customers to lease on an annual basis to upgrade to a new phone each year. It was not known if Apple would expand the program to non-US customers.

The bold move by Apple, which begins selling its new iPhone 6S and 6S Plus on Friday, gives the company a new connection with customers, while allowing an easier switch of carriers.

"Apple is trying to have a more direct relationship with its customers, it always has," said Avi Greengart, who follows mobile technology for the research firm Current Analysis.

By "unbundling" the device and the service, this opens up competition for both, according to Greengart.

The new model creates challenges for wireless carriers, which until recently have been able to maintain their customer base by reserving the top-selling phones for contracts.

The shift means "customers are more likely to upgrade more quickly," said Jan Dawson at Jackdaw Research.

"They obviously will be coming to an Apple store, they won't go to a carrier store where they might be enticed to buying a Samsung or something else," he said.

This "could dramatically increase churn" for carriers because customers can switch whenever they like with no real penalty," Dawson said.

## India's Modi eyes Silicon Valley on US trip as euphoria fades



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaks during a public rally in Chandigarh.

REUTERS, New Delhi

TECH titans will court Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Silicon Valley this weekend, but away from the glitz, the euphoria of his first trip to the United States a year ago has faded as promised deals stall and key reforms flounder.

A firm believer in the new economy and power of social media, Modi will be welcomed by Apple, Facebook and Google, who want to grow in a market where the world's third-largest internet user base is set to multiply in coming years.

Apple CEO Tim Cook is due to drop by Modi's hotel in San Jose, before the Indian leader joins Mark Zuckerberg for a "townhall" session broadcast live from Facebook headquarters.

He will be able to relive some of the glory of 2014's rock star-like Madison Square Garden rally in New York when he addresses 17,000 Indian expatriates at San Jose's "Shark Tank" sports arena on Sunday.

Modi's standing in the United States rose further when US President Barack Obama visited India in January and the two tightened defence and civil nuclear cooperation with a promise of billions of dollars of business.

The relationship is still evolving, with the world's two biggest democracies agreeing on Tuesday to jointly train peacekeepers in Africa, a step in a growing military alignment partly aimed at balancing China's expansion.

But in other areas, progress has been slow. Western businesses and diplomats in Delhi privately say Modi's reputation as a man of action has been hurt by setbacks

on economic reform. Some carp that he is better at speeches and launching projects than seeing them through.

The Thomson Reuters/INSEAD Q3 Asian Business Sentiment Survey found on Wednesday that optimism among Indian companies, while still high, had been dented by the slow pace of reform.

US lawmakers wrote to the Obama administration on Monday complaining about barriers to trade they said had got worse under Modi, as well as disputes over copyrights and patents.

"The sheen is off, certainly. He is no longer the new kid on the block," said Neelam Deo, a former Indian diplomat in Washington now at Gateway House, a think-tank. "The first trip was euphoric, this one is much more a consolidation phase of the relationship."

On Tuesday, India's cabinet approved a \$2.5 billion purchase of 37 Apache and Chinook helicopters from Boeing, giving Modi something concrete for when he meets Obama on Monday.

But the clearance came more than a year after the deal was agreed by the defence ministry, highlighting the lack of funds due to a slower-than-expected pick-up in India's economy and the bureaucratic morass that plagues ties between the countries.

"We have formidable bureaucracies on both sides," with residual mistrust from the Cold War, said Lalit Mansingh, a former Indian ambassador to Washington, referring to India's previous strong ties with the Soviet Union.

"Things are bound to be slow."

While the clearance has been given, India and Boeing must still sign a commercial contract.

## Myanmar garment workers long for 'manufacturing renaissance'

AFP, Yangon

WEARING an expression of intense concentration, Myanmar garment worker Htet Myat Nyein stitches jackets bound for wealthy foreign high streets, part of a booming industry fuelling much of the country's modernisation drive.

"I learned to sew at this factory," she tells AFP, her soft voice almost lost in the clatter of sewing machines at the Shweyi Zabe factory on the fast-industrialising outskirts of Yangon.

Most families in her hardscrabble Hlaing Thar Yar neighbourhood still survive on remittances from abroad -- the legacy of decades of brutal rule and economic mismanagement under the former junta.

Htet Myat Nyein, her cheeks dusted with circles of traditional thanaka powder, says there are just two career paths for those who remain in her neighbourhood: "Garment work and beauty parlours, that is all."

Myanmar has pinned its hopes on industrialisation as it looks to reshape an economy long-dominated by subsistence agriculture and resource extraction that enriched a tiny elite but did nothing to lift living standards in one of the world's poorest nations.

Plans to build a prosperous Myanmar, which still languishes around the bottom of global development tables, rest on the outcome of the November 8 elections pitting the army-backed ruling party against Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD).

Suu Kyi, who recently toured a garment factory with Angelina Jolie, is widely expected to lead her party to a sweeping win in the first nationwide election it has fought in a quarter century.

But with the next president yet to be decided -- under the military drafted constitution Suu Kyi is banned from the top post -- questions abound over the possible trajectory of reforms.

Nonetheless with the World Bank's projections placing Myanmar as the world's fourth fastest growing economy, the



Employees work at a garment factory in the Shwe Pyi Thar industrial zone in Yangon.

emergent nation is a tempting prospect.

Ideally located between China and India it boasts a 51 million strong population offering both cheap labour and potential new consumers.

Garment making is expanding fast. Exports last year reached \$1.5 billion -- 14 percent of the country's total exports -- according to the Myanmar Garment Manufacturers Association, which says some 70 percent of industrial jobs in Yangon are now in the sector.

The country has already attracted major fashion brands, including high street staples Gap and H&M.

Overall foreign investment to Myanmar jumped to \$8 billion this year, double the government's target, while the country's first Special Economic Zone (SEZ), the Japan-backed Thilawa project near Yangon, is stirring to life.

But Myanmar will have to develop fast if it is to challenge regional garment manufacturing hubs like Cambodia, Vietnam and Bangladesh. Between 60 and 70 percent of Myanmar's citizens still work in agriculture.

Political uncertainties have also dampened the investment buzz as

the nation heads towards crucial elections, while firms face a host of challenges including unstable electricity, patchy communications, poor infrastructure and significant corruption.

Sean Turnell, an expert on Myanmar's economy who has advised Suu Kyi's party, said a "manufacturing renaissance" could see the sector as a whole account for up to 30 percent of the economy.

"I very much expect that the NLD will implement policies sufficiently pro-growth and development that effectively all of Myanmar becomes one enormous and prosperous SEZ," he told AFP.

The West has welcomed many of Myanmar's reforms, including better labour rights and ending draconian media censorship, although there have been rising fears of backtracking in recent months.

But not all garment workers find success.

Earlier this year Myanmar set its first ever daily minimum wage -- of 3,600 kyat (\$2.80) -- in an effort to balance cut-price competitiveness with rising calls for fair pay from workers faced with surging consumer prices.

The move was welcomed by

Western brands whose consumers are increasingly conscious of the human cost of their clothing after high-profile scandals like the deadly 2013 collapse of Rana Plaza in Bangladesh.

But some employers said they could not afford the new wages, which still leave Myanmar labour among the cheapest in the region.

Activists say more than a thousand people were sacked in response to the changes while state media recently reported some factories have simply stopped paying overtime or transportation costs.

Hayman San spent three years honing her skills at a garment factory before being unceremoniously fired with some 200 colleagues.

"I did nothing wrong, I am so angry," said the 27-year-old, who shares a small bamboo shack with her parents and sister in Hlaing Thar Yar, where rickety homes fringe hulking new factories.

The family is part a flood of people who have left villages in the rice-growing Irrawaddy Delta to seek work in Yangon.

Still unemployed, she says her plans of opening a small farm supplies shop in her village were receding.