

StanChart seeks nominations for agriculture awards

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Standard Chartered yesterday called for nominations for the Agrow Award that recognises the contributions of farmers and organisations in agriculture. Individuals and organisations can submit nominations until March 5.

"We hope we will be able to motivate thousands of farmers and entities by recognising the growers for their exemplary contributions," said Bitopi Das Chowdhury, head of corporate affairs of Standard Chartered Bangladesh, at a press meet at the capital's Sonargaon Hotel.

The SCB in association with the Bangladesh Brand Forum will give the awards in seven categories, with the winners taking home Tk 5 lakh each in prize money.

The categories are: Best Agricultural Organisation in Research & Innovation, Best Agricultural Organisation in Support & Execution, Best Agricultural Exporter, Farmer of the Year (Male), Farmer of the Year (Female), and Farmer of the Year (subsistence market farmer group) and Best Use of Technology in Agriculture.

Bitopi said SCB launched the award in 2014 as part of its corporate social responsibility.

SCB said it aims to connect with an area that is at the heart of the Bangladesh economy and its people. The focus is to recognise the best practices of the agriculture industry and promote them, and assist the sector with knowledge and information for further development, it added.

Shariful Islam, founder of Bangladesh Brand Forum, said the country has achieved near self-sufficiency in agriculture mainly because of the efforts of its farmers.



Bitopi Das Chowdhury, head of corporate affairs of Standard Chartered Bangladesh, and Shariful Islam, founder of Bangladesh Brand Forum, attend a press meet to announce the call for nominations for Agrow Awards at Sonargaon Hotel in Dhaka yesterday.

The government, development partners and other stakeholders also played a part.

He said the winners for the awards will be selected by a jury comprising government officials, agriculture experts, economists, development activists, scientists, bankers, professors and high officials of agricultural institutions.

The winners are expected to be awarded by the end of March this year, he added.

Last year, seven awards were given. Of the winners, Md Bilal Sikder, who was recognised as the Farmer of the Year, said the prize money enabled him to grow tomato, guava and other crops on

higher acreage. "I will be able to do better if I get loans at low interest," said Sikder, a small farmer from Jessore. Fatema Zohora, who won the Farmer of the Year award in female category, said she invested the money on high-value crops such as modern jujube, locally named as Bao Kul.

But the grower from Chuadanga has to sell the seasonal fruit at very low prices to wholesalers as she cannot bring the produce directly to Dhaka for dearth of fund to invest in proper transport vehicles. "It will be tough to bear the losses if I face a blow in other crops like I have with Bau Kul," she said.

FICCI calls for withdrawal of tax on workers' fund

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Foreign investors yesterday urged the government to withdraw the tax imposed on the workers' profit participation fund (WPPF).

"Taxes have been imposed on the WPPF through Finance Act 2015," said Rupali Chowdhury, president of the Foreign Investors' Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

The WPPF is a fund where workers and management contribute equally for the welfare of the workers.

FICCI has called for the strict implementation of the ceiling on the provident fund contribution. The provident fund contribution ceiling has also been fixed at 8 percent by the labour rule, an alignment of which will be difficult for companies that are already contributing a higher percentage, Chowdhury added.

If the ceiling is not complied with, it can lead to labour unrest as some workers will receive more than others, Chowdhury said at the monthly luncheon meeting of the FICCI at the Westin hotel in Dhaka.

To operate a manufacturing company, a company requires complying with more than 15 laws, including income tax law, VAT law, foreign exchange regulations and labour laws, Chowdhury said.

"FICCI members being compliant with all relevant laws require rearrangement in their operations to ensure conformity with the changed laws," she said.

Speaking as the chief guest, Mujibur Haque, state minister for labour and employment, said the government has not been allowing trade unions in the services sector considering the foreign investment.

After the Tazreen Fashions fire and Rana Plaza building collapse, the government amended the labour law of 2006 in July 2013, allowing full freedom of association in the factories.

After amendment, trade union registration in the garment sector gained momentum. Training programmes started for the office bearers of the newly formed unions, with technical assistance from the International Labour Organisation, Haque said.

The government also published the rules of the amended labour law in September last year, focusing on worker safety and welfare through a wide range of consultations with the stakeholders, he said.

"It is imperative to mention here that good industrial relations are a prerequisite to development. We need to work together with synergy for productive employment and sustainable development."



Rokia Afzal Rahman, a former adviser to the caretaker government, and Selim RF Hussain, managing director of Brac Bank, launch the Brac Bank Women's Forum "Tara" at an event at Bashundhara Convention City in Dhaka. Tara will be a platform for the bank's female employees to share their challenges and concerns within or outside the bank through a helpline.

Tk 10,000cr sought for state banks

FROM PAGE B1

Zahid Hossain, lead economist at the World Bank Dhaka office, said the BFID's fund demands would be a huge burden on the budget. It is understandable that large banks like Sonali are too big to be allowed to fail. They need recapitalisation in order to continue their regular operations.

However, it is important to harden their budget constraints so that they do a complete clean-up of all bad loans by a specified date, he said.

"Unconditional recapitalisation provides no incentive to do some deep surgery to repair their damaged balance sheets."

He said the BFID's annual performance agreement with the banks should have specific indicators on the solvency of each of the institutions seeking recapitalisation.

Disbursement from the budgetary provisions for recapitalisation should be linked to achieving the specified improvements in these indicators.

Over the longer term, rising stress in the state-owned banks will require more radical reforms in the structure of governance in them. The fundamental problem with the state banks is that they are run as state-

owned enterprises: the government has improper influences on their operations, according to Hussain.

Also, many private industrial companies have been hit by delays in making their investment projects operational due to unavailability of basic utility connections such as gas, water and electricity, leaving them unable to repay their loans to state banks.

These problems have been around for a long time and are deeply rooted, he said.

Without a thorough reform of the SOEs and the way that banks are run as SOEs, the problems with the banking system will never be really solved, even after the banks are fully or partially relieved of current non-performing loans.

In response, Alam said the BFID signed performance contracts last year for the first time with banks.

Since it was the first time, the targets were softer. But this year, they will be made tougher, he said.

Furthermore, initiatives have been taken to bring reforms to state banks, he said, adding that efficient and skilled persons are being appointed in the banks' boards.

British inflation hits one-year high in Jan

AFP, London

Britain's annual inflation rate rose in January to its highest level for a year, buoyed by the higher prices for clothing and alcohol, official data showed Tuesday.

The 12-month Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose by 0.3 percent last month, after registering 0.2 percent in December, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) said in a statement.

Alcohol and tobacco increased by 1.3 percent compared with January 2015, when there had been heavy discounts on beer.

Inflation also rose as fuel and food prices fell by less than they experienced one year ago.

Despite the rise in the CPI, British inflation still remains historically low, with the Bank of England predicting it will remain below the government's official 2.0-percent target for some time yet.

Mobile payment picks up at book fair

FROM PAGE B1

"The introduction of mobile banking service, or debit and credit cards as payment options brings a lot of benefits to customers," said Milon Kanti Nath, owner of Anupam Prokashoni.

Nath, also president of the publishers' association, said although they began accepting digital payment since 2014, the response is huge this year.

Zahedul Islam, spokesperson for bKash, said the response is encouraging. "This is a unique experience for the visitors at the fair as it gives them an alternative payment option."

EU unveils plans to vet energy contracts outside bloc

AFP, Brussels

The EU unveiled Tuesday plans to vet energy contracts that member states sign with countries outside the bloc as it seeks to cut dependence on Russian gas.

The European Commission, the executive of the 28-nation bloc, proposed changes so it can review such agreements before they are signed to see if they comply with EU rules. Currently the Commission can only examine contracts after they have been signed.

"It means no country should sign an inter-governmental agreement until the Commission has given its opinion," EU energy Commissioner Miguel Arias Canete told a press conference.

Such opinions would be given in 12 weeks and the member state would have to do its "utmost" to take the findings into consideration.

"This is an important and unprecedented step to ensure a level playing field for all," Canete said.

"As EU markets continue to integrate, decisions taken by one member state can have a negative impact on the security of supply in neighbouring countries," he added.

The European Union is already investigating whether Russian state energy firm Gazprom has imposed unfair prices which breach the EU's rules, in a move which

further inflamed relations already strained by the Ukraine crisis.

For the tenth year in a row, EU states imported half of their energy needs in 2014. A third of their gas imports comes from Russia alone and some newer eastern members are almost entirely reliant on Moscow.

"With political tensions on our borders still on a knife-edge, it is a sharp reminder that this problem is not going to go away," Canete said.

Brussels also wants to be automatically notified of any commercial contract lasting more than one year if the market share it involves means that it carries a risk of security of supply. "We consider a 40 percent market share to be an appropriate threshold," Canete said.

Germany's plans for a second pipeline, Nord Stream 2, to carry Russian gas under the Baltic Sea have caused some disquiet.

Rome saw it as hypocritical that Berlin should pursue a major deal when the rest of the bloc is being asked to sacrifice their interests to pursue sanctions against Russia over Ukraine.

The Nord Stream 2 consortium said its deal is only based on commercial cooperation between companies and is not based on any agreements between countries.

"Therefore there are no potential issues with EU law compliance of underlying intergovernmental agreements," it said in a statement to AFP.

Power purchase deals signed with S Alam-led groups

FROM PAGE B1

SEPCOIII, a power generation company in China, would be the contractor for engineering, procurement and construction of the two power plants. It operates in coal, oil, gas-fired thermal power, hydropower, solar, wind, and biomass-based power generation.

S Alam Group has investment in commodities, transport, banking, leasing, insurance, stock broker houses and merchant banking business and power.

Tawfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury, energy adviser to the prime minister, Ahmad Kaikaus, additional secretary of the Power Division, Mohammad Saiful Alam, chairman of S Alam Group, Zhang Hongson, executive president of SEPCOIII, and Hu Jai, head of project manager at HTG, were present during the programme.

Start-ups to get a boost from govt

FROM PAGE B1

"Lots of Bangladeshi companies are well-known globally, but they are not registered as local firms," Zunaid Ahmed Palak, the state minister for ICT, said at the event.

"We hope leading ICT companies of the future will emerge through this process," Palak said.

The government has decided to brand Bangladesh as an ICT nation, he said, adding, "Through this process billions of dollars will be invested in Bangladesh."

The scheme aims to create more than 1,000 start-up companies by 2021, he said.

In the first phase, 60 companies will be selected by April this year, and the top ten among those will be awarded by July.

The remaining 50 will also get space at Janata Tower, but they will have to pay for it. Shyam Sunder Sikder, ICT secretary; Erik Aas, chief executive of Banglalink; Shameem Ahsan, president of BASIS, and Hosne Ara Begum, managing director of BHTPA, were also present.



Hafiz Ahmed Mazumder, chairman of Pubali Bank, and Md Abdul Halim Chowdhury, managing director, attend the annual managers' conference of the bank at Ocean Paradise hotel in Cox's Bazar.



M Akhter Hossain, deputy managing director of Shahjalal Islami Bank, and Ikram Iqbal, director of Computer Network Systems (CNS), sign an agreement for collection of vehicles' registration fee and taxes at the bank's branches. CNS signed the deal on behalf of Bangladesh Road Transport Authority.



Rezaul Hossain, chief commercial officer of bKash, and Md Mujibur Rahman, chief financial officer of United Hospital, pose at the signing ceremony of an agreement. The hospital's customers can now pay their medical bills through bKash.