

star BUSINESS

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BTCL to shell out Tk 2,048cr to upgrade network Subscribers to get high-speed internet

REJAUL KARIM BYRON

Bangladesh Telecommunication Company Ltd is set to upgrade its countrywide network with a view to competing with the mobile phone operators, who grabbed much of the market share of the state-run landline operator.

Following the overhaul, BTCL will be able to offer low-cost and high-speed internet connectivity through land phones.

For that end, the cabinet committee on economic affairs yesterday awarded a Chinese joint venture -- a consortium of ZTE Holding Company Ltd and ZTE Corporation -- the job for Tk 2,048 crore.

Of the total cost, the Chinese government will provide Tk 1,852 crore or \$231.51 million as loan.

Under the programme, three main platforms will be established in Dhaka, Chittagong and Khulna, from which

telecom services will be made available in all divisions, districts and upazilas.

Video call, video conference and different types of modern services based on broadband internet can be provided through land phones, according to a report from the telecom division.

At present, customers enjoy these services through mobile phones.

BTCL has been lagging behind private telephone operators and its revenue is shrinking as well, said an official of the telecom division. "It is impossible for BTCL to survive only by providing traditional services through fixed phone."

Providing high-speed data service for mobile operators is costly, but a fixed phone operator like BTCL can do so at lower costs through the optical fibre network, he said.

"It will also boost BTCL's revenue earnings." A powerful IP network will also be built under the programme.

Solar energy dims as grid power expands

SOHEL PARVEZ

Solar home system providers find their market squeezed due to the rapid expansion of electricity connections in off-grid areas, particularly by Bangladesh Rural Electrification Board (BREB), said industry stakeholders.

"Our sales declined in recent years for various factors including the expansion of grid electricity," said Muhammad Ishaque, coordinator of solar programme at Integrated Development Foundation, a non-government organisation.

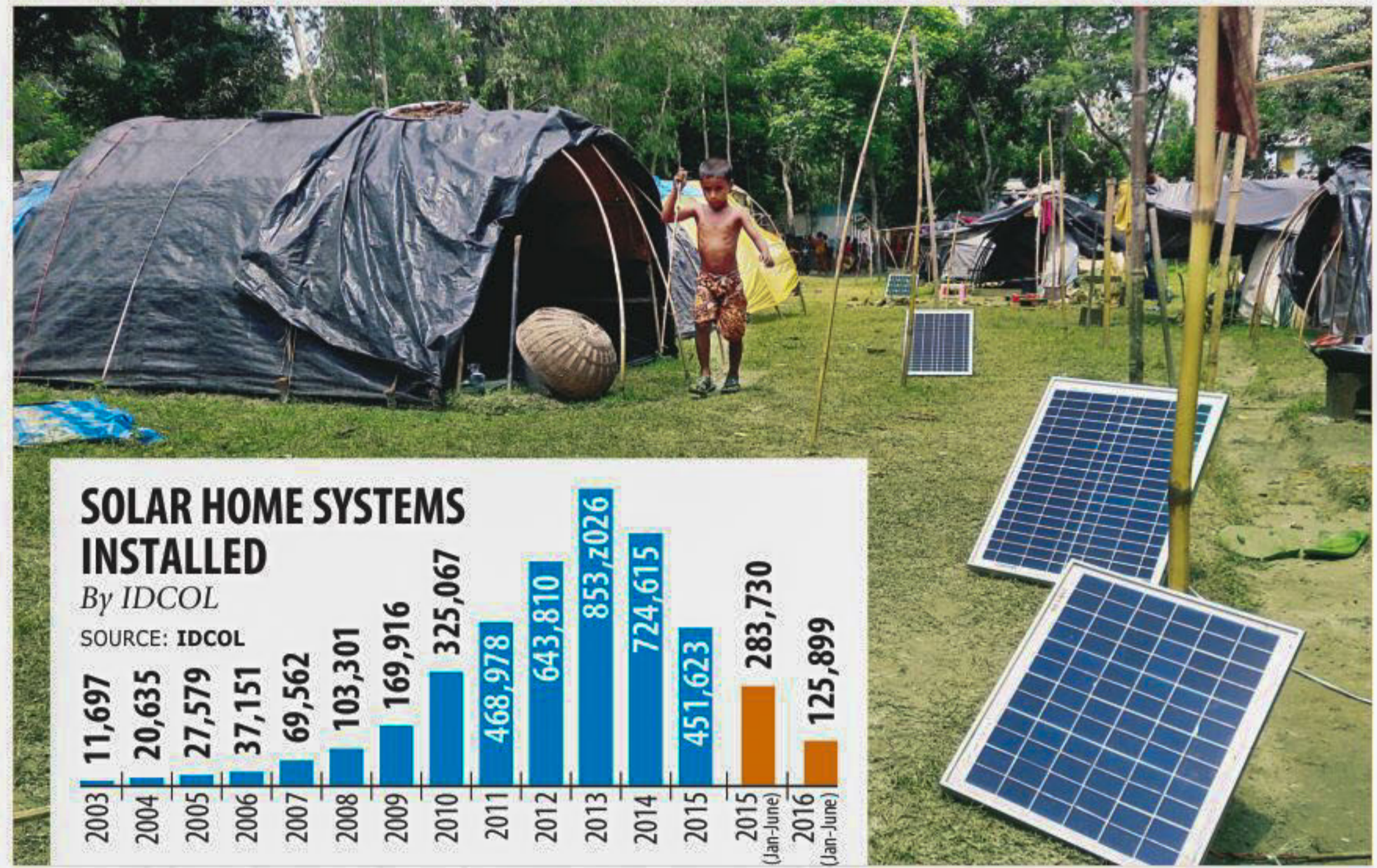
IDF is one of the 56 organisations that get low-cost finance from state-run Infrastructure Development Company Ltd (Idcol) to light up homes in off-grid areas with green electricity.

In recent years, BREB expanded its activities in many areas where there was no grid connection, leading to a decline in demand for solar home systems there, operators said.

In the last two fiscal years, BREB gave power connections to a total of 47.39 lakh users, which is almost the same number it managed in the preceding ten years.

Between fiscal 2004-05 and fiscal 2013-14, a total of 48.40 lakh connections were given.

Subsequently, the installation of solar home systems, which reached



its peak in 2013, began declining from 2014. In 2013, 8.23 lakh systems were installed.

The number tumbled 38 percent year-on-year to 4.51 lakh in 2015, according to Idcol.

The situation changed further this year: in the first six months only 1.25 lakh units were installed,

down 56 percent year-on-year.

"The operation area for solar home systems has declined significantly for BREB's expansion in recent years," said Enamul Karim Pavel, head of Idcol's renewable energy.

Plus, there has been a slowdown in demand in areas where BREB is expected to provide connection in

the next two years.

Idcol officials and market operators also blamed the unorganised marketers for selling what they termed 'inferior quality' solar panels at prices much below the rate offered by organisations with which Idcol works.

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BASHUNDHARA FIRE

100 gutted shops to miss Eid sales

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

About 100 shops gutted by a fire at Bashundhara City Shopping Complex are unlikely to reopen before Eid-ul-Azha as it will take more time to clean up the debris and restore the outlets.

"We are working with the authorities of Bashundhara mall in trying to reopen the market in a day or two," MA Hannan Azad, president of the association, said yesterday.

But the shops burnt by the fire on Sunday on Block C of the mall's sixth floor will take longer time to resume sales, he added.

What caused the fire is still unknown and losses are estimated to be around Tk 50 crore, according to Azad. Fire service officials and mall authorities are yet to assess the extent of losses caused by the blaze.

Mall authorities yesterday allowed shop owners to enter and check their shops and take necessary steps.

Ajit Kumar Bhowmik, deputy director of fire services (planning), who is also the head of a five-member probe committee formed by the department, said the panel visited the spot and is working to identify the reason behind the fire.

"We are assessing the extent of damage to the traders. We need three to four more days to calculate the loss."

Firefighters continued their work at the multi-storey mall to assist the shoppers to clean up the burnt-out goods, said Jasim Uddin, the mall's head of marketing.

Monir Hossain, a trader on the sixth floor, said he had imported shoes worth around Tk 2 crore in three shops to sell ahead of Eid. "Everything in my three shops was burnt. The fire ruined everything. I don't know when I will be able to reopen my shops."

Synthetic and polythene objects were burnt inside the shops, which made it difficult for firefighters to determine any hidden blaze. According to fire service officials, as many as 29 fire engines were used in the operation. Eleven



AMRAN HOSSAIN

Shop owners and their employees stand in line to enter Bashundhara City Shopping Complex in Dhaka yesterday to check out their outlets, three days after a fire burnt about 100 shops at the mall.

people, trapped on the rooftop, were rescued unharmed.

The Bashundhara mall, one of the biggest in Bangladesh, houses about 2,300 shops in addition to food courts, Cineplex and gymnasiums.

This is the fifth fire incident at the market and the adjacent 20-storey building, which has been used as Bashundhara's office since 2009, according to shop owners and employees.

BTRC seeks to remove bar on Citycell shutdown

MUHAMMAD ZAHIDUL ISLAM

The telecom regulator yesterday filed an appeal against a High Court order that barred it from shutting down Citycell's service on August 24.

"The law has given full power to Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission to seize any operator's spectrum anytime," said Attorney General Mahbubey Alam.

The government had planned to bring down the curtains on Citycell's operations yesterday after the operator failed to clear dues amounting to Tk 477.63 crore.

But on Monday, a High Court bench of Justice Syed Refaat Ahmed asked the BTRC not to bar Citycell's operations until September 16, which is the deadline for the operator to respond to a licence cancellation notice sent by the telecom regulator.

On August 17, the BTRC served notice on Citycell asking it to explain within 30 days why its licence should not be cancelled despite the failure to pay its dues.

"Licence cancellation and spectrum cancellation are two different matters," Alam said.

The government can shut down an operator's services anytime it wants, but to cancel its licence due procedures have to be followed, which can take a while.

The BTRC is now going through the procedure to cancel Citycell's licence, but in the meantime it can shut the operator's services by cancelling its spectrum, he said.

The hearing on the appeal will be held on August 28, according to the attorney general.

Citycell is taking preparations for the court hearing, said one of its senior executives.

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Unique gets primary licence to set up economic zone

It will attract investment in import-substitute industries

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority (Beza) yesterday awarded a prequalification licence to Unique Group to set up an economic zone in Narayanganj and attract investment mostly in import-substitute industries.

"We will focus on attracting investment from home and abroad in import-substitute industries, such as LPG, petrochemicals, motorbike and telephone sets," said Mohd Noor Ali, managing director of Unique Group.

"We will develop a state-of-the-art economic zone here," he said, adding that entrepreneurs from Japan, China and India have expressed their interest to invest in the zone.

Unique Group will now conduct an environmental impact assessment, a feasibility study and make a master plan by next year in line with the licence requirements, Ali said at the licence awarding ceremony at the Beza office in Dhaka.

It will be the 11th economic zone to be developed by a private sector company.

Although the prequalification licence was for 55 acres, Unique Group plans to set up the zone on 300 acres, which will gradually be expanded to 600 acres.

The zone—Sonargaon Economic Zone—is close to the Dhaka-Chittagong highway and the Meghna river.

"So, it will be a suitable place for investment," Ali said, adding that the zone will create around 10,000 jobs at various levels.

An economic zone is a designated area in a country with special economic regulations that differ from the rest of the country.

An entrepreneur can enjoy various benefits, including tax incentives, from the authorities by setting up an industrial unit in an economic zone.

Beza Executive Chairman Paban Chowdhury said they have selected

77 sites and acquired 30,000 acres of land so far.

"We are creating a 'land bank' so that we can provide the entrepreneurs with necessary land for setting up industrial units in the next 50 years," he said.

On Tuesday, Beza awarded a final licence to Meghna Group of Industries for setting up Meghna Economic Zone in Narayanganj.

The authority also awarded prequalification licences to eight local private companies to set up nine other economic zones -- one each to AK Khan and Company, Abdul Monem Ltd, Meghna Group, Bay Group, Aman Group, Maisha Group, United Group and two to Bashundhara Group.

Beza is also setting up four economic zones in the public sector.

It plans to develop 100 such zones by 2030 on 75,000 acres to create jobs for one crore people and produce goods and services worth \$40 billion.

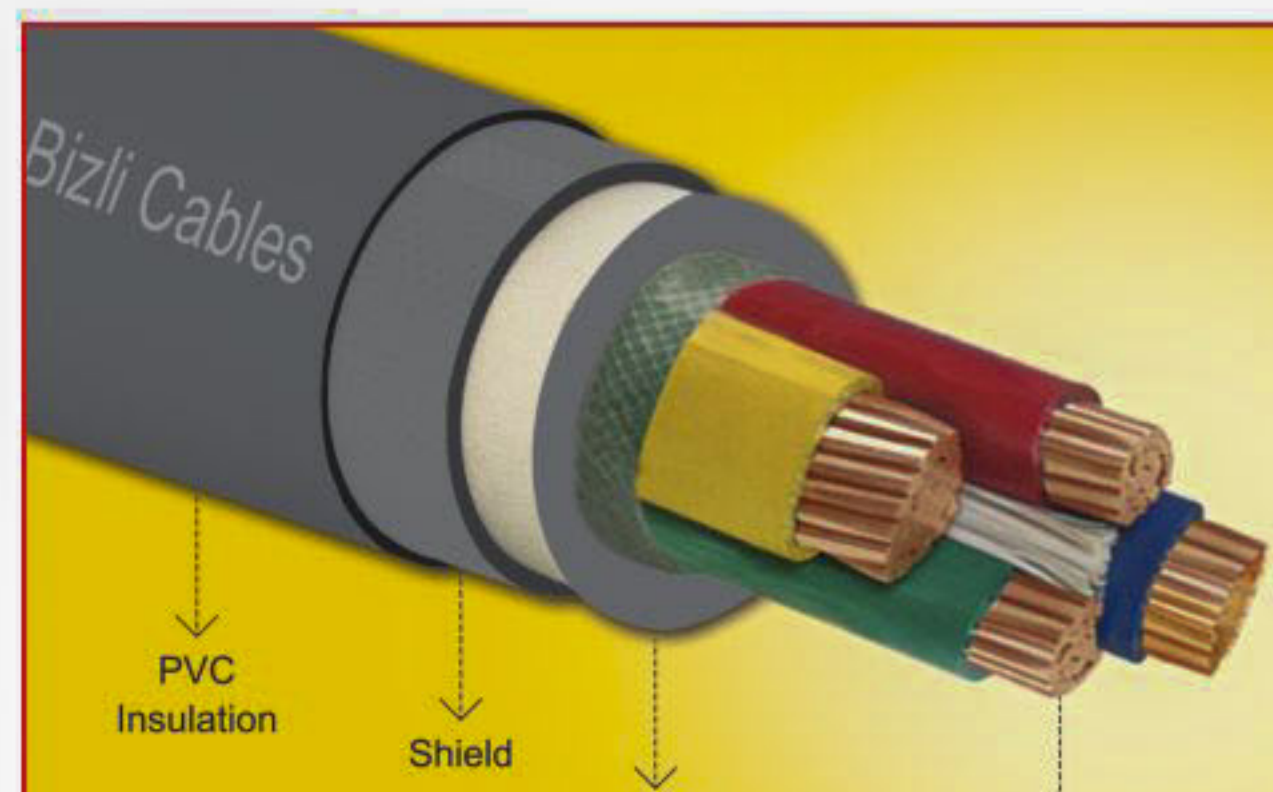
Exports by EPZ factories rise 9pc

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Exports by the factories located in the country's export processing zones rose 9.16 percent year-on-year to \$6.67 billion last fiscal year.

The export target was set at \$6 billion for 2015-16, although the exports figure reached \$6.11 billion in the previous year, Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority said in a statement yesterday.

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