REGENT AIRWAYS

Air Vice-Marshal Ehsanul Gani Chowdhury, chairman of the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh, cuts a cake at the launching ceremony of a flight of Regent Airways to Katmandu, at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka on Wednesday. Dilli P Acharya, Nepal's chargé d'affaires to Bangladesh, and M Fazle Akber, CEO of Regent Airways, were also present.

Indonesia, Philippine groups acquire Chevron's $3b geothermal assets

REUTERS, *Manila*

Philippine property to banking conglomerate Ayala Corp said on Friday two groups of companies in which its energy unit has stakes will acquire Chevron's geothermal assets in Indonesia and the Philippines, earlier valued at $3 billion.

Ayala, owned by one of the Philippines' richest clans, is looking to expand its power generation business and is aiming to boost capacity to up to 2,000 megawatts by 2020, double a previous plan. It would be its first investment in Indonesia's power sector.

AC Energy Holdings Inc, as part of the Indonesian and Philippine groups of companies, has signed share sale and purchase agreements with the Chevron group composed of Chevron Global Energy Inc, Union Oil Company of California and their affiliates, Ayala said in a statement.

Ayala did not disclose the acquisition price but Reuters reported earlier the assets at stake were valued at about $3 billion.

Chevron is selling assets, cutting jobs globally and slashing capital spending to save cash in a bid to preserve its dividend amid weak oil prices.

In Indonesia, Chevron operates the Darajat and Salak geothermal fields in West Java, with a combined capacity of 235 MW equivalent of steam and 402 MW of electricity.

In the Philippines, Chevron owns 40 percent of the Philippine Geothermal Production Company Inc, which operates the Tiwi and MakBan geothermal field in Southern Luzon and supplies steam to power plants with a combined capacity of around 700 MW.

AC Energy has a 19.8 percent stake in the Indonesian consortium that also includes Star Energy Group Holdings Pte Ltd, Star Energy Geothermal Pte Ltd, and Electricity Generating Public Company Ltd. The Philippine consortium consists of AC Energy and Star Energy Group Holdings Pte Ltd.

Two other Philippine companies, Energy Development Corp and Aboitiz Power Corp, were in Chevron's shortlist of potential buyers, along with Japanese firms including Marubeni Corp, local media reported last month.

Madagascar's world-class cocoa, a bitter sweet cash crop

AFP, *Madagascar*

A massive zebu cow lumbers out of the tropical forest in Ambanja in the north of Madagascar carrying a heavy cartful of cocoa pods destined to become some of the most expensive chocolate in the world.

"These red ones here, they're of the Criollo variety, the most sought-after cocoa in the world," says Cyrille Ambarahova, a local small-scale farmer.

Standing in the middle of his single hectare of cocoa trees -- "100 percent organic", he says -- Ambarahova uses a long, hooked stick to harvest only the most mature pods.

Cocoa arrived in Madagascar in the 1900s, and today is still a low-volume export compared with the country's coffee, vanilla and shellfish production.

With an annual production of 7,000 tonnes, Madagascar is still a dwarf in the global cocoa market.

But the variety of the crop found on the island -- the prized Criollo -- has earned Madagascar a reputation for high-quality cocoa.And unlike the other luxury crop on the island, vanilla, cocoa can be harvested year-round.

In Ambanja, where tuk-tuk rickshaws easily outnumber cars, the rhythm of life is dictated by the cocoa market.

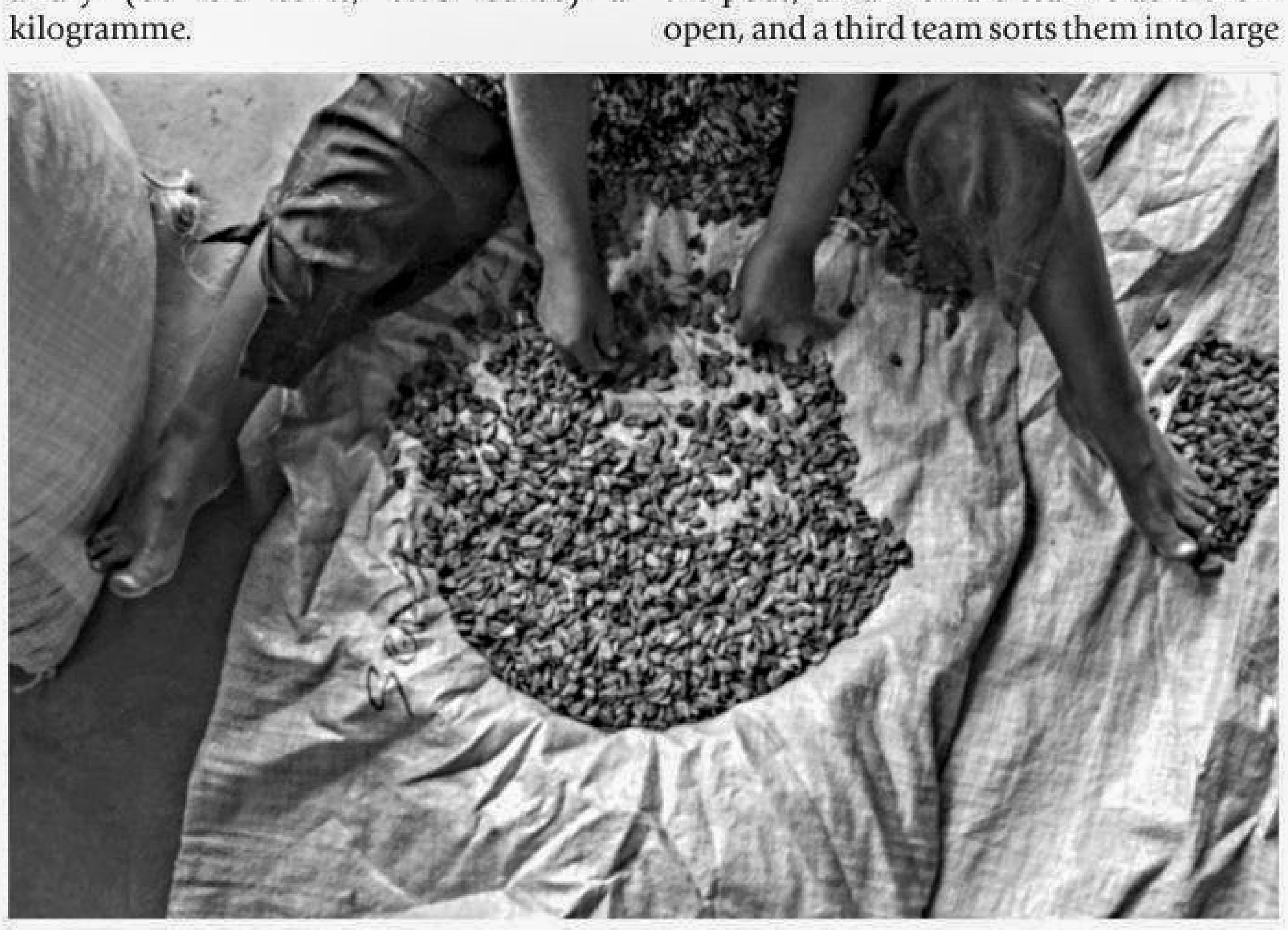
The zebu's cargo was offloaded in Ambarahova's backyard, and the process of cracking the pods and extracting the beans began.

Sticky and white, it was difficult to imagine they end up as fine chocolate.

Next, they are sold to collectors commissioned by large chocolate producers but small-scale producers complain they have little say in the going price.

Ambarahova joined a cooperative with several colleagues to negotiate higher prices, but their efforts have borne little fruit.

On the day AFP visited Ambarahova's farm, one international chocolate maker had bought his weekly harvest for 2,600 ariary (80 US cents, 0.75 euros) a kilogramme.



AFP/FILE

A worker is sorting cocoa beans at a cocoa processing plant in Beni.

"The price that collectors pay now, it's not the true price," rails fellow farmer Remi Jaofeno. "The price should be tripled, then it would be the right price."

A few kilometres away, on the 635-hectare (1,570-acre) Mava cocoa plantation, the era of the zebu has long since passed and staff zip between the trees in 4x4s.

Here, the cocoa is processed along an efficient factory line: an all-male team picks the pods, an all-female team cracks them open, and a third team sorts them into large outdoor trays.

Drying out in the open air, the beans begin to give off the strong smell of the chocolate they will become.

"We consider Madagascar to be one of the paradises of cocoa of the world," says plantation manager Thomas Wenisch.

"We are relatively free from disease because of our isolation from the rest of the world, and our fairly severe dry season helps slow down the development of mould."

But for all its advantages, Madagascar's role in chocolate production largely ends there.

The bulk of the harvest is exported and processed abroad into the fine chocolate that in the streets of Paris can sell for close to 5 euros ($5) per 100-gram slab.

The little that remains on the island is processed in the capital Antananarivo and sold back to the few locals who can afford it.

"Most of the world's chocolate is made with a cocoa that is not fine cocoa," says Wenisch.

"And the companies selling (it) are the big ones -- Lindt, Craft, Suchard, Mars -- they make chocolate bars, sweets. And they're pushing to bring down the price of cocoa."

Philippe Bastide, a cocoa expert at the French Agricultural Research Centre for International Development, says the costs involved in buying and transporting the cocoa did not justify the profit margins that the large manufacturers enjoy.

"There are costs all along the chain of production, but the Malagasy small-scale producers could really get a fairer deal," he says.

Nusli Wadia sues Tata Sons, board members for defamation

REUTERS

Nusli Wadia, a former independent director on the boards of Tata Motors Ltd, Tata Steel Ltd and Tata Chemicals Ltd, has filed a defamation case against holding company Tata Sons and 11 of its board members and executives.

Wadia said Tata Sons and the individuals cited, including patriarch Ratan Tata, had defamed him "by printing, publishing and circulating per se false, frivolous, baseless, incorrect, libellous and defamatory material concerning the Complainant."

The former director added the actions had tarnished his reputation and "caused distress, hurt and humiliation, as well as pecuniary loss, social disadvantages, injury to feelings, mental pain and suffering to the Complainant."

Wadia said he would pursue criminal charges of defamation, as well as abatement and "criminal action with common intention" violations that could be punishable by imprisonment for up to two years, or a fine, or both.

Tata Sons declined to comment saying it was yet to see the petition, a copy of which was seen by Reuters. The individuals named were not immediately reachable.

Wadia had been expected to take legal action after he was ousted from the boards of Tata Motors and Tata Steel this week. He was removed from the board of Tata Chemicals Ltd at an extraordinary general meeting late on Friday.

The outspoken director has roiled boards of the $100 billion salt-to-software conglomerate by publicly backing Tata Sons' former chairman Cyrus Mistry, who was ousted in November, sparking an acrimonious battle.

Mistry has accused Tata Sons of mismanagement and corporate governance failures, allegations which Tata Sons has refuted.

Mistry resigned from the boards of Tata Group companies earlier this week and filed a petition with the National Company Law Tribunal to either replace Tata Sons' current board, or appoint a retired Supreme Court judge as non-executive chairman.

At an extraordinary general meeting of Tata Chemicals' shareholders on Friday evening, Ratan Tata thanked them for their "overwhelming" support.

Amazon starts flexing muscle in new space - air cargo

REUTERS, *Allentown*

A cargo plane emblazoned with "Prime Air" descended from an empty sky at Lehigh Valley International Airport on Tuesday, ninety minutes from the bustle of New York City, loaded with crates of goods during the peak holiday shopping season.

It's one of 40 jets leased by Amazon.com Inc for a new cargo service to meet delivery demand from the retail giant's customers. Exclusive payload data reviewed by Reuters and interviews with airport officials around the country show that Prime Air planes are flying nearly full, but with lightweight loads, taking away valued business from FedEx Corp and United Parcel Service Inc.

Expanding into transportation, from trucks to planes, is one of Amazon's most important endeavours as it strives to lure new customers with fast shipping while keeping costs under control.

The world's largest online retailer is sending more packages, more often, and later in the day to serve its estimated 35 million to more than 50 million U.S. members of Amazon Prime, a service that promises two-day shipping for $99 per year.

Bulky boxes with goods once purchased in stores, like toilet paper, are a revenue driver at UPS and FedEx. That's in part because they now are charging customers increasingly by boxes' volume rather than weight. Shipping its own big, light packages is helping Amazon dodge those rising fees.

To date, Amazon has only said it leased the planes to speed up shipping and to backstop cargo partners during the holiday season. FedEx and UPS have delivered items late for Christmas in recent years.

"Our own delivery efforts are needed to supplement that capacity rather than replace it," Amazon spokeswoman Kelly Cheeseman told Reuters. She declined to comment on eluding cargo airline fees.

Amazon's planes fly to at least 10 airports across the United States, supplying its warehouses nearby. Officials at four airports said Amazon's flights are operating near capacity but landing with lower-than-average weight -- meaning it is placing low-density shipments inside the jets.

Amazon aircraft on a monthly basis handled only between 37 percent and 52 percent of their maximum loads by weight, according to an analysis of cargo, capacity and landing data from the four airports, with supplementary information from tracking website FlightAware.com. By contrast, FedEx and UPS were at 53 percent and 56 percent capacity, respectively, according to U.S. Transportation Department data for the year ended September 2016, excluding weight carried for free.

"You're dealing with cargo that's big in dimensions, but in pure weight it's light," said an airport ramp manager in California.

Airports in Tampa and Charlotte reported similar payload data for the carriers contracted by Amazon, but they did not specify whether the flights were full by volume or whether they were operated on Amazon's behalf.

A seventh airport outside Chicago said the planes were not full, though daily flights only started in October 2016, and Amazon likely is learning the market, transport experts said. The remaining airports did not comment.

FedEx declined to comment. Steve Gaut, vice president of public relations at UPS, declined to comment on Amazon's airline but said customers commonly handle parts of their logistics in-house.

Reuters could not determine the extent to which, if any, Prime Air had an effect on the bottom lines of FedEx or UPS to date. Reuters could also not determine how much Amazon has spent on aircraft leases so far, key to whether the fleet has cut its costs overall.

The payload figures Reuters reviewed do not include November or December, when contractor ABX Air, a unit of Air Transport Services Group Inc, paused flights for Amazon after a pilot strike.

Flight data shows another way that Amazon is departing from cargo companies' road map in an attempt of its top goal: rapid delivery.

Using FlightAware.com and similar websites, Reuters tracked the schedules of Amazon contractors and verified with airports which flights were on behalf of the retailer.

Many of the company's eastbound flights leave the states of Washington and California unusually late at night: its flight from Stockton to Wilmington, Ohio departs close to 2:00 AM Pacific Time (10:00 GMT), for instance. FedEx instead schedules most eastbound service no later than 9:00 PM (5:00 GMT) to ensure arrival at its Memphis, Tennessee hub in time for sorting packages overnight.

Egypt targets 5pc economic growth by mid-2018

AFP, *Cairo*

Egypt targets a five percent economic growth rate in the year to June 2018, the finance ministry said Sunday as the government seeks to revive an economy battered by political turmoil.

Egyptian authorities have battled high unemployment, inflation and a collapse in tourism income since the 2011 uprising that toppled former president Hosni Mubarak.

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who led the 2013 military overthrow of Mohamed Morsi, Egypt's first elected civilian president, vowed to get the economy back on track after his election the following year.

But consumers have been hit by further price hikes since November when Cairo floated its currency and slashed fuel subsidies as part of an economic reform package linked to a $12-billion International Monetary Fund loan.

The Egyptian pound had been pegged at 8.83 to the dollar, but has since weakened to more than 19 pounds to the dollar. Egypt's inflation rate jumped to 19.4 percent in November from 13.6 percent the previous month, according to the central bank.

Despite its woes, the government has projected a 5.2 percent GDP growth in the year to June 2017.

Economic output grew 4.3 percent in the year to June 2016, the ministry of planning said in November.

The finance ministry hopes to bring unemployment -- which officially stood at 12.6 percent from July to September -- down to 11 percent in the year to June 2018.

The ministry said it also wants to cut its budget deficit to 9.5 percent of GDP in the year to June 2018, down from 12.2 percent the previous year.

It said it hopes to cut public debt to 94 percent of GDP in the year to June 2018, with a medium-term target of 80 percent.

"The government will continue to implement a structural reforms package to support productive sectors especially industry and exports, while attracting investments," the ministry said.

It said it would press ahead with implementing a value added tax and "policies to rationalise spending."

BDCOM ONLINE

BDCOM Online's Chairman Wahidul Haque Siddequi presides over the 20th annual general meeting of the company at AMM Convention Centre yesterday. The shareholders declared 5 percent cash and 7 percent stock dividends for the year ended June 30, 2016. Managing Director SM Golam Faruk Alamgir was also present.