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Star BUSINESS

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Labour law to be amended by Nov

EU wants Bangladesh to improve labour rights to retain GSP

REFAYET ULLAH MIRDHA

The government is on course to amending the labour law within the stipulated timeframe of November, although a coalition of rights groups yesterday claimed the progress was very slow.

At the International Labour Conference in June, Bangladesh committed to amend the labour law by the end of November.

The amended labour law is expected to be passed by the parliament in the next session, said Mujibul Haque Chunnu, state minister for labour and employment.

"So, we are well ahead of schedule," he said, adding that the draft copy of the proposed amendment of the labour law has been forwarded to the International Labour Organisation before the deadline of August 31 for their consultation.

The draft of the amendment to the labour law was prepared in consultation with the stakeholders of the tripartite council that was formed for the garment sector in April, the minister said.

Chunnu denied the allegation that Bangladesh is lagging behind in amending the labour law as per the commitment.

He also denied the allegations of the international rights groups that

AT A GLANCE

- The amended law may be passed in the next session of parliament, says minister
- The draft was prepared in consultation with stakeholders of a tripartite council in April
- Labour organisations renewed its call to launch an investigation into the government's failure to bring necessary reforms to protect workers' rights

labour and union leaders were being harassed by police.

"I have not heard any information regarding the harassment of labour leaders. I have been holding meetings with labour leaders frequently on different issues. Nobody complained to me," the minister said.

The development comes as the European Union has long been urging Bangladesh to show tangible progress on labour rights to avoid losing the generalised system of preferences (GSP) benefit that allows the country duty-free export to the 28-nation bloc.

Meanwhile, a coalition of labour organisations yesterday called on the European Commission to launch an investigation into the Bangladesh government's failure to make necessary reforms to protect workers' rights.

The abuses in the report show that the government is in violation of the

sustainability compact it signed with the European Union in August 2013 committing to responsible business behaviour and ensuring workplace safety.

"The government of Bangladesh is consistently failing to meet its obligations under international law to protect workers' rights," said Sharan Burrow, general secretary to the International Trade Union Confederation.

Subsequently, in light of the new evidence, the trade unions and labour organisations are renewing their calls to the European Commission to make good on its promise to launch a trade investigation into Bangladesh.

EU is Bangladesh's largest trade partner and its action could spur significant change in the country, the letter said.

On behalf of the European Trade Union Confederation, Confederal Secretary Liina Carr stated: "We call the European Commission to be consistent with its 'Trade for all' agenda to promote the respect of labour rights around the world."

Trade between EU and Bangladesh should be an opportunity to raise labour standards.

"We need to break up the vicious circle of workers' exploitation in the garment industry in Bangladesh that ultimately affects European workers too in a race to the bottom," Carr added.

PayPal to start operation today

BSS, Dhaka

PayPal, a global online payment system, will start its service in Bangladesh today.

Sajeed Wazed Joy, prime minister's adviser for information and communication technology, is scheduled to launch the international gateway at a function at Bangabandhu International Conference Centre in Dhaka.

People can now receive the service from nine commercial banks, including Sonali, Rupali and Social Islami Bank, and the service will be extended gradually, an official of the ICT Division told the news agency yesterday.

"The PayPal authorities have taken the decision after reviewing the potential and market of Bangladesh," he added.

The official said the ICT adviser has provided all sorts of cooperation to launch PayPal to provide the country's people with the world's most popular online money transfer service.

PayPal, available in more than 200 markets around the world, enables its accountholders to receive money in more than 100 currencies, withdraw funds in 56 currencies and hold PayPal account balances in 25 currencies.

More rice on way from India, Thailand

REJAUL KARIM BYRON

The government is set to import 1 lakh tonnes of parboiled rice from neighbouring India under a state-to-state arrangement as part of its aggressive push to boost stocks.

The development comes after the cabinet committees on economic affairs and purchase yesterday approved the proposal for import of rice for \$455 per tonne -- \$15 less than what the government paid to bring in the food grain from Vietnam earlier.

This comes after the committees last week approved the import of 1 lakh tonne of white rice from Myanmar for \$442 per tonne under a similar arrangement.

Earlier in June, the government imported 50,000 tonnes of parboiled rice for \$470 per tonne from Vietnam under a government-to-government arrangement.

Another 1.5 lakh tonnes of rice will soon be brought in from Thailand for \$465 per tonne, said food ministry officials.

In recent months, the government has moved to import rice through competitive bidding, which tends to be lower than the price obtained under government-to-government arrangements.

For instance, last week, 50,000 tonnes of parboiled rice was imported through competitive bidding--for \$427 per tonne.

Under state-to-state arrangement rice price is usually higher. But the government opts for such arrangement as the supply is ensured and the quality is also better.

Since June, the government took up an aggressive approach to import rice after

production was badly struck by flash floods and fungal attacks.

The flash floods in the six northeastern haor districts and fungal attacks (rice blast) in 19 districts during the boro season led to the loss of 20 lakh tonnes of the staple, according to the food ministry.

Subsequently, the government also decided to import 20 lakh tonnes of food grains -- 15 lakh tonnes of rice and 5 lakh tonnes of wheat -- this fiscal year.

This is 11 lakh tonnes more than the government's earlier projected food import volume of 9 lakh tonnes.

Due to food crisis, the import of rice at both the government and private levels have picked up.

From July 1 to October 4, 10.78 lakh tonnes of rice was imported, of which the government brought in 2.94 lakh tonnes. Last fiscal year the government did not import any rice. However, at the private level 13.30 lakh tonnes of rice was imported, a major portion of which was towards the end of the year.

6 TV STATIONS UNDER CHINESE FINANCE

The cabinet committee on purchase also gave the approval to a Chinese state-owned firm to build six full-fledged TV stations in six divisional cities.

The Chinese company Aerospace Long-March International Trade and Radio, Film & TV Design and Research Institute will jointly make the studio and architectural design of the administrative building for about \$125 million, which is equivalent to Tk999 crore.

READ MORE ON B3

Noman Group's production hit by gas crisis in Tongi

REFAYET ULLAH MIRDHA

Noman Group, the first Bangladeshi garment exporter to cross the \$1 billion-mark, is staring at losses of more than Tk 20 crore thanks to the gas crisis in Tongi area over the last one month.

Production in the company's factories, which are set up on 125 bighas of land at Tongi, slumped more than 40 percent due to the gas crisis, Mohammad Abdullah Zaber, deputy managing director of Noman Group, said yesterday.



Mohammad Abdullah Zaber

For running the factories in full capacity gas pressure of 8 pounds per square inch is required, but the pressure has lowered to about 2 PSI now, he said.

"The other factories in Tongi are also facing the same problem."

Noman Group exports home textile and linen fabrics worth \$480 million a year from the Tongi units alone, according to Zaber.

Mir Mashiur Rahman, managing director of the state-owned Titas Gas Transmission & Distribution Co. Ltd, which supplies gas to the belt, acknowledged that the current gas pressure in Tongi is low.

The reason being two wells of Shahjibazar gas field at Brahmanbaria were damaged.

"The field concerned has been working to repair the damage. I am hopeful the damage can be repaired by next week," Rahman added.

READ MORE ON B3

Make 4G guidelines more investment friendly

AMTOB president says in an interview with The Daily Star

MUHAMMAD ZAHIDUL ISLAM

The government should revisit its recently-approved 4G guidelines to make them more investment-friendly and help operators roll out the fourth-generation technology, said the president of the Association of Mobile Telecom Operators of Bangladesh.

Erik Aas said all the major operators have expressed willingness to embrace 4G technology.

"The industry believes the guidelines, as they are now, are not investment-friendly because there are many conditions that are not pragmatic at all," he told The Daily Star in an interview on Sunday.

He said the operators will only participate in the process if all of their concerns are addressed and the guidelines are made favourable for further investment.

Aas served as the chief executive officer of Grameenphone from October 2004 to October 2007. Later, he joined a mobile operator in Indonesia as its top executive and worked for seven years before joining Banglalink in 2015 as its chief executive.

"At Banglalink, we are technologically prepared and we have already started making SIMs ready for 4G. One of our partners has successfully tested 4G on our network," said the CEO of the third-largest operator.

The guideline was issued last month. The AMTOB has raised 23 concerns over the 4G guidelines and is waiting for a response from the government.

He said they have found many unrealistic conditions in the guidelines. "If these conditions remain in



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From left, Erik Aas, president of the Association of Mobile Telecom Operators of Bangladesh and CEO of Banglalink, and Pierre Boutros Obeid, chief technology officer of the operator, are seen during the interview.

place it will discourage our shareholders to invest in 4G rollout."

Operators fear they would not see return in the near future on an estimated Tk 22,600 crore investment that would be needed to deploy the 4G technology.

Aas said 4G is nothing but technological neutrality of 3G. However, the authorities have added a number of conditions that are not related with the 4G technology at all.

A conversion fee has been set to make all 2G spectrum technology-neutral, which Aas said will only push up investment requirement.

He said spectrum price for auction is significantly higher than that in the association's proposals.

The government plans to earn Tk 11,000 crore from spectrum sale.

"Bangladesh is one of a few countries where spectrum scarcity for mobile operators is very high. High

spectrum prices are always an obstacle to a robust rollout because the service-delivery cost becomes high, making it difficult to offer better services."

If the government cuts spectrum price, mobile operators would be able to offer 4G services at affordable prices.

He said mobile operators are investing heavily in technology and would continue to do so, but it has to be within a regulatory regime where investment will yield right return.

The AMTOB said some conditions would create challenges for the operators to make positive decision on 4G. Some operators are unable to source funds locally, said Aas.

The guidelines also stipulate that operators would have to store data for 12 years -- a provision that will also be a challenge for the operators.

READ MORE ON B3

Biman: a popular airline among Nepalese

It celebrates 43 years on Dhaka-Kathmandu route

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Biman Bangladesh Airlines has celebrated its 43 years of operations in Nepal.

The national airliner started flying on the Dhaka-Kathmandu-Dhaka route in 1974 as its fourth international destination. Since then, it has carried 25 lakh passengers on the route, said M Ali Ahsan, Biman's director for marketing and sales.

"Since the inception, the Dhaka-Kathmandu-Dhaka route has remained one of the profitable destinations of the national carrier," he told a ceremony celebrating the occasion in the Nepalese capital on Tuesday.

At the programme, Biman awarded five top travel agents based in Nepal.

Ahsan said Biman has gained popularity among tourists as it offers quality service at cheap fares on the route.

Biman now operates a brand new Boeing 737-800 ER aircraft on the route every day, offering more pleasant trips to its valued passengers, he added.

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Dhaka stocks flat as turnover falls

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Turnover on the Dhaka Stock Exchange continued to fall as Tk 530 crore worth of shares were traded in the premier bourse yesterday, down 14.2 percent from the previous day.

The amount was less than half of the turnover of Tk 1,092 crore recorded on October 11.

Merchant bankers and stockbrokers said many investors were inactive and adopted the wait-and-see approach.

As a result, the market ended flat with the DSEX—the benchmark index—advancing by 6.47 points to 6,025.

Of the traded issues, 155 advanced, 141 declined and 35 closed unchanged.

Among the major sectors, non-bank financial institutions, food and allied, engineering, fuel and power and pharmaceuticals and chemicals posted positive returns. Banks and telecoms fell.

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