Chinese farmer turned eco-warrior takes on big business

AFP, *Yushutun, China*

Wang Enlin, an elderly farmer who left school when he was 10 years old and taught himself law armed with a single textbook and dictionary, makes for an unlikely eco-warrior.

Yet the 64-year-old is determined to reap justice as he readies for a fresh battle in his war with a subsidiary of China's largest chemical firm, which he accuses of polluting and destroying his farmland.

"In China, behind every case of pollution is a case of corruption," he said of his mission to bring Qihua Chemical Group (also known as Heilongjiang Haohua Chemical) to account.

Wang and others villagers from northeast Heilongjiang province have sued Qihua accusing it of contaminating their soil, rendering it untenable for crops, in a case that has stretched on for more than 16 years.

This February, Wang and his self-styled "Senior Citizen Environmental Protection Team" earned a rare victory when a local court ordered Qihua to clear up their chemical waste site -- adjacent to the farmers' land -- and pay a total of 820,000 yuan ($120,000) to compensate for lost harvests in 55 affected rural households.

But that ruling was overturned on appeal, and Wang is now gearing up to fight back on another day in court.

"We will absolutely win. The law is on our side," Wang told AFP.

His case is testing the possibilities of a national environmental protection law revised in 2015.

The legislation was widely touted as a way to open the courts to public interest environmental damage lawsuits, but has been criticised for poor implementation.

Qihua is a subsidiary of the state-owned ChemChina, the country's largest chemical enterprise. It specialises in crude oil processing and petroleum products.

Wang's battle began in 2001, when a village committee leased 28.5 hectares (70 acres) to Qihua for use as a chemical waste dumping ground without the villagers' consent.

The villagers claim that the company failed to take proper pollution control measures.

Wang says he felt compelled to teach himself law after realising he lacked the knowledge or resources to take on the might of an industrial giant.

China had just emerged from its Great Famine when Wang left school: "It didn't matter at the time whether you got an education," he said. "It wouldn't change your fate."

He was well into middle age when he found a textbook on environmental law at a local bookstore. It took him years to understand as he painstakingly looked up unfamiliar terms in a dog-eared dictionary.

After petitioning the local authorities to no avail, he received aid in 2007 from the Centre for Legal Assistance to Pollution Victims, which helped the villagers put together a lawsuit using evidence he had compiled.

A 2013 sampling of mercury levels conducted on the site by the Green Beagle Institute, a Beijing-based non-profit, found the land was "not suitable for agricultural use".

The Ministry of Environmental Protection included Qihua in a 2014 list of "major" environmental cases.

But it was still another year before Wang's case was accepted into China's justice system.

Prominent environmentalist Ma Jun told AFP that while the litigation process has been streamlined since 2015, pollution lawsuits can still take years to be heard partly because "local governments give some degree of protection to polluting companies".

Today Wang prepares his own legal paperwork and hosts daily gatherings at his home for villagers hoping to learn about their rights.

Wang, who suffers from lung problems and requires medicine to help him breathe, accuses Qihua of "pretending to be deaf and mute" on the issue.

He says he is frequently visited by police officers who urge him to drop the case and stop talking to the media.

Qihua's lawyers declined to comment on the case.

In September, the Qiqihar Intermediate People's Court accepted Wang's request to appeal the ruling that overturned his initial victory.

"We're just farmers, without any resources or power," said Wang Baoqin (no relation), a member of Wang Enlin's senior citizens' environmental group.

IBCCI elects top brass

Abdul Matlub Ahmad

M Shoeb Chowdhury

Sanjay Kailash Munshi

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Abdul Matlub Ahmad, chairman of Nitol Motors Ltd, has recently been elected as the president of the India-Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry (IBCCI).

Moreover, M Shoeb Chowdhury, chief executive officer of HSTC Ltd, and Sanjay Kailash Munshi, country manager of Asian Consumer Care Private Ltd, have been elected as vice-presidents, says a press release.

The chamber also elected 16 members of board of directors for the period of 2017-19.

Sanjeeb Kumar Roy, executive director of SUN Pharmaceuticals (Bangladesh) Ltd, has been elected secretary general; Md Abdul Wahed, managing director of Quality Enterprise, joint secretary while Dewan Sultan Ahmed, chairman and managing director of Bangladesh System Technology Ltd, treasurer.

Regent offers special discounts on anniversary

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Regent Airways is offering up to 50 percent discounts on tickets for 7 international and 2 domestic routes, to mark its seventh anniversary, the airline said in a statement yesterday.

The tickets have to be bought between November 12 to 30 for travel between January 15 next year to June 28.

Credit cardholders of Standard Chartered Bangladesh, Eastern Bank, City Bank and Mutual Trust Bank can purchase tickets under equal monthly instalment facility and pay later without any interest.

BGCCI appoints new executive director

STAR BUSINESS DESK

The Bangladesh German Chamber of Commerce and Industry has recently appointed Mohammed Abdul Matin as its executive director, the chamber said in a press release yesterday.

Prior to the appointment, he was the executive director of the Foreign Investors' Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Matin started his career as a banker in 1968. He also worked for the United Nations Children's Fund, Bangladesh Population and Health Consortium and Plan International.

Crisis-stricken GE to unveil painful roadmap to salvation

AFP, *New York*

Iconic American industrial behemoth General Electric, which has lost investor confidence amid bad investment decisions, is preparing to slice up its empire again, selling major business segments and laying off thousands.

Hammered by financial markets, with its market capitalisation down more than $100 billion since January, the maker of jet engines and power turbines is paying dearly after making losing bets that the energy sector, in particular oil and gas, would grow indefinitely.

Shareholders appear resigned to a cut in dividends, the first since 2009, as GE had only $7 billion in cash flow at the end of September, but was due to pay out $8 billion.

164 businesses get CIP cards

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The government gives 3 percent cash incentive on exports to new markets and urged exporters to explore potential in those destinations, he added.

Bangladesh considers all export destinations as new markets except those in the European Union, the US and Canada.

On behalf of the CIP card recipients, Asif Ibrahim, a former president of the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said Bangladesh's exporters are facing tough competition due to the devaluation of the currencies of countries such as Vietnam and Turkey.

He urged the government to take special measures to boost exports to countries such as Brazil, Mexico and Russia.

Ibrahim called for clearing of congestion in the Chittagong port and improving the infrastructure at the land ports for smooth release and transportation of export and import goods.

The government should also withdraw the source tax on export receipts and give 5 percent incentive to exporters, he said.

Bijoy Bhattachariya, vice-president of the EPB, and Sheikh Fazle Fahim, acting president of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry, also spoke.

BHBFC

Debasish Chakrabarty, managing director of Bangladesh House Building Finance Corporation, and Naser Ezaz Bijoy, CEO of Standard Chartered Bangladesh, exchange documents after signing a deal at a programme in Dhaka. The deal will enable the corporation to collect the loan instalments from its clients' accounts maintained with different banks through Bangladesh Bank's electronic funds transfer network.

Farmers Bank continues to worry BB

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"The BB also sought to know why we are disbursing fresh loans despite facing liquidity crisis," Shameem added.

Established in the second half of 2013, the bank's financial health started deteriorating not long after, and in January last year the central bank appointed an observer in Farmers' board with the view to bringing in loan discipline and improving risk management and internal control.

Between September and November in 2015, the BB conducted special inspections at Farmers Bank's three branches and found gross violation of banking rules in disbursing loans of about Tk 400 crore.

In a meeting held on October 29, the parliamentary standing committee on the finance ministry voiced deep concern over the deteriorating condition of Farmers Bank and NRB Commercial Bank, another fourth-generation bank.

The BB provided the committee with reports on the two banks. At Farmers, 13 counts of irregularities were found, which include disbursement of loans to non-existent companies.

The bank also gave loans to its own directors as well as those of other banks, violating the credit discipline.

"Farmers Bank does not have the capacity to pay back the depositors' money and refund the credit taken from other banks," the BB said in the report.

The bank has been facing an acute liquidity crunch over the last one year.

"It is now surviving through mobilisation of funds from general people and other banks, offering interest rates higher than the market rate," the report said.

The bank has failed to maintain the cash reserve ratio with the central bank between October last year and September this year and has subsequently been penalised with Tk 18.49 crore.

For a few days between January and June, the bank also could not maintain the statutory liquidity ratio with the BB due to its liquidity crisis.

A bank has to keep 19 percent of its depositors' money in the form of SLR and CRR with the BB to protect the depositors' interest.

Besides, the bank disbursed loans to defaulting clients against forged Credit Information Bureau reports and took the burden of a number of bad loans from other banks, flouting banking rules.

Awami League lawmaker Muhiuddin Khan Alamgir, also a former home minister, is the chairman of the Farmers Bank board. He is also the chairman of the parliamentary standing committee on public accounts.

As of June, Farmers' non-performing loans amounted to Tk 306.21 crore, which is 6.35 percent of its total disbursed loans. This is much higher than many older private banks.

NBR to waive duty on electronic cash registers

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The NBR had planned to buy 10,000 ECRs for large shops, wholesalers, restaurants and other businesses by the end of last year as part of its target to implement the VAT law 2012 from July this year.

The revenue authority scrapped the plan after the government deferred the implementation of the law for two years.

To capture the transaction data from cash registers, the NBR will be establishing the Electronic Fiscal Device Management System, Rahman said. The system will allow the NBR to get real-time data of sales at shops.

The cash registers, to be supplied to the shop owners by importers as per NBR specification, will be connected to the revenue authority's central server through fibre optics or mobile network, he said.

Ship collisions at Ctg port raise concerns

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The institute's chairman, MA Fasihur Rahman, in a keynote speech said ships were making some common mistakes such as not following prescribed directions, making errors in navigation and failing to judge effects of tidal currents and not calculating the tidal rise.

He advised ships should take particular account of tides, currents, weather conditions, wind direction and speed while crossing or anchoring and keeping a distance of around half a nautical mile between ships to avoid collisions.

Fasihur Rahman said the three zones at the outer anchorage could safely accommodate at best 42 vessels but currently there were over 100.

Habibur Rahman, former principal officer of Mercantile Marine Department, stressed the need for following previous investigation reports of accidents to avoid these things in future.

Shahin Rahman, member for harbour and marine at Chittagong Port Authority (CPA), said they were planning to expand the port's capacity as more ships are arriving because of rising imports.

He also emphasised educating merchant mariners on tidal currents and other aspects of the area.

Omar Faruq, CPA secretary, said they were upgrading the regulation on safe navigation in the area for the masters.

Leather trade show kicks off in Dhaka Thursday

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Participating companies are going to display their latest innovations and technologies, said Nanda Gopal K, director of ASK Trade & Exhibitions, at a media briefing at La Vinci hotel.

Md Saiful Islam, president of the LFMEAB, also spoke.

Western Marine to spend Tk 500cr on expansion

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Yesterday, the board recommended 3 percent cash and 12 percent stock dividend for the year ended on June 30, 2017.

The share of the company improved to 'A' category status from 'Z' category on November 1 after it disbursed 10 percent stock dividend for 2014-15 and 12 percent for 2015-16.

The company had taken a stay order from the High Court in 2015 over dividend declaration as it could not complete its financial statement, according to Hossain.

The crisis arose after the company's export orders to Germany were cancelled in 2013 because of the fallout of the global recession, he said.

The company held two years' annual general meetings in one session in October this year with permission from the High Court after finalising the financial statement.

Earnings per share of the company increased to Tk 2.14 at the end of June this year against Tk 2.01 in the same month last year.

The company topped the turnover list yesterday with its shares worth Tk 26.53 crore changing hands. It, however, lost Tk 2.4 or 5.85 percent to close at Tk 38.60.

Tabassum Kaiser, vice chairperson of City Bank, receives the "Best Consumer Digital Bank in Bangladesh 2017" award, presented by Global Finance, a North America-based magazine, from Richard Scholtz, managing director for Europe and Asia at the publication, at a ceremony at the auditorium of the Royal Society of Arts, London, UK.

CITY BANK

PUBALI BANK

Habibur Rahman, chairman of Pubali Bank, opens the bank's 456th branch on Station Road in Sylhet. Md Abdul Halim Chowdhury, managing director of the bank, was also present.