

Bank Asia, Coca-Cola to work for women empowerment



BANK ASIA

Tapas Kumar Mondal, managing director of International Beverage Private Ltd (Coca-Cola Bangladesh), and Humaira Azam, deputy managing director of Bank Asia, pose with the participants of a training programme at Bhaluka in Mymensingh.

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Bank Asia recently joined a Coca-Cola Bangladesh project to impart agent banking training among 25 successful women entrepreneurs of Jamalpur in the latter's Bhaluka plant in Mymensingh.

The women are from a Coca-Cola project titled Women Business Centers (WBC), which aims to assist rural women into providing a variety of services supporting and developing their income generation capacities.

Starting off in January 2015 with 10 WBC in Jamalpur, Khulna and Bagerhat districts, the project now has 40 WBC, having imparted knowledge on agricultural production, marketing, mobile balance recharge and photocopy and nutrition services to 40,000 entrepreneurs.

Bank Asia from now on will support this project by training women into becoming its agents, helping communities at the farthest corners access financial and banking services.

Tapas Kumar Mondal, managing director of International Beverage

Private Ltd (Coca-Cola Bangladesh), thanked Bank Asia.

"As an agent of Bank Asia they could generate good income through their agent commissions, as the more they transact, the more financial rewards they are going to receive," said Humaira Azam, deputy managing director of Bank Asia.

"...we are going to hand over their agent banking license very soon. We hope that it would be a very fruitful and mutually beneficial partnership for both of us," she added.

Armenia looks to solar energy to move out of Russia's shadow

AFP, Yerevan

Landlocked and poor, Armenia has long relied on Russia for its energy needs, but the government is hoping to reduce that dependence by tapping a resource that is plentiful in the region: the sun.

With few fossil fuel resources of its own and its sole nuclear power plant nearing the end of its working life, Armenia is banking on renewable energy to reduce its dependence on its former Soviet master, which accounts for nearly 83 percent of gas imports.

And with Armenia much sunnier than most of Europe -- according to government figures, it receives 1,720 kilowatt hours per square metre of sunlight every year, compared to an average of 1,000 in Europe -- solar energy looks to be the most promising.

"To ensure its energy security and independence, Armenia, like any other country, strives to diversify energy sources," the ex-Soviet republic's Deputy Energy Minister Hayk Harutyunyan told AFP.

Within four years, up to eight percent of the country's energy needs will be covered by renewables, according to the government's policy paper, "Energy Roadmap."

The document estimates the country's potential capacity of solar energy production at up to 3,000 megawatts -- enough to meet domestic demand and even make Armenia a net electricity exporter.

Harutyunyan said that a consortium of investors from 10 countries will soon start building a solar plant capable of producing 55 megawatts of electricity.

One of the backers, the World Bank, has earmarked some \$60 mil-

lion (51 million euros) for the project, as part of its initiative to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions.

So far, three solar power plants with capacity of one megawatt each have been built across the country and seven more will follow by the end of 2018.

Next year, the headquarters of the Armenian cabinet of ministers will fully switch to solar energy, subsequently followed by all governmental buildings.

A pilot project was launched in March to install rooftop solar panels in remote villages across the country to provide households with electricity and hot water.

In late 2015, an Armenian tycoon with business interests in Russia, Samvel Karapetyan, bought out Armenia's indebted electricity distribution company from a Kremlin-controlled holding, Inter RAO.

Bacchu's company account under ACC scanner

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An inspection conducted by the Bangladesh Bank in 2013 found irregularities in approving loans amounting to Tk 4,500 crore in four branches of BASIC Bank between December 2009 and November 2012. A part of the sum ended up in two bank accounts of two firms owned by Bacchu's younger brother Sheikh Shahriar Panna.

This came to light through the findings of an investigation conducted by the Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit, the anti-money laundering unit of the central bank, in 2014.

Companies grow cold on IPOs

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IPOs became scarce in 2017 due to the drawn-out book-building method, said Mohammad Saleh Ahmed, chief executive officer of IIFDC Capital.

Most of the companies are interested in coming to the market through the book-building method as the process allows companies to take premium.

For instance, Aamra Networks took a premium of Tk 25 from the general public for each share of Tk 10.

"But the BSEC is not giving approval due to disputes in the price bidding process."

About 30 companies are waiting for a year now to get the BSEC's approval, he said.

Though the main objective of raising fund through the IPO is to expand business activities, six of the companies -- save for ICB AMCL First Agrani Bank Mutual Fund -- raised funds to clear bank loans.

About 33 percent of the IPO proceeds of Aamra Networks' Tk 56.25 crore were used for loan repayment.

Nahee Aluminium used 26.67 percent of its total IPO proceed for loan repayment, Oimex 33.33 percent, BBS cables 20 percent, Nurani Dyeing 27.44 percent and Shepherd 22.23 percent, according to DSE.

Signs point to strong US shopping season

AFP, New York

Americans shopped with greater gusto at malls and online this holiday season amid a strong labor market and cold winter weather, retail sales experts said Tuesday.

Shoppers in the world's biggest economy spent generously over the "Black Friday" weekend in late November that kicks off the US holiday shopping season, and buying picked up further in December, analysts said.

Retail experts won't have the final tally on the overall holiday season until January. That will include figures from the day-after Christmas, "Boxing Day," which is usually one of the busiest shopping days of the year.

But early figures point to a good year overall. Mastercard SpendingPulse estimated sales growth for the season at 4.9 percent, the strongest annual boost since 2011.

"Overall, this year was a big win for

retail," said Sarah Quinlan, senior vice president of market insights at Mastercard.

"The strong US economy was a contributing factor, but we also have to recognize that retailers who tried new strategies to engage holiday shoppers were the beneficiaries of this sales increase."

IHS Markit pointed to strong macroeconomic factors such as a 17-year high in US consumer confidence in November and a 17-year low in unemployment that allowed consumers to open their wallets.

Chilly weather in much of the country also supported sales of jackets and other winter apparel, said Chris Christopher, executive director at IHS Markit.

"There was a significant ramp-up of holiday sales," said Christopher, who shifted his projection midway through December to 4.7 percent growth for the season from an earlier mark of 4.2 percent growth.

"Everything is pointing to a good

holiday season."

The passage of a massive tax cut bill by Republicans in Congress and pushed by President Donald Trump also likely lifted spending somewhat, although Christopher noted that "things were going strong before that."

Analysts also noted the favorable calendar with Christmas falling on Monday and allowing last-minute shopping over the weekend.

The upbeat appraisals boosted shares of leading retailers, a sector that has seen myriad bankruptcies and store closures with the growth of Amazon and other online retailers, at the expense of the traditional American shopping mall.

Most brick-and-mortar chains saw their share prices rise in afternoon trading Monday, including Wal-Mart Stores, up 1.0 percent, Macy's, up 4.6 percent, Gap, up 1.5 percent and mall operator Simon Property Group, up 1.4 percent.

Bangladesh again denied GSP

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Workplace safety in Bangladesh has already been applauded all over the world after the inspection and remediation of the garment factories by the Accord and Alliance through fixing the loopholes in structural, fire and electrical aspects, the official said.

The US is the single largest export destination for Bangladesh. As a least developed country, 97 percent of goods originating from Bangladesh enjoy duty-free benefits on export to US markets as per the decision of the Hong Kong Ministerial Meeting of World Trade Organization in 2005.

However, the country's main export item, garments, has not been included in this "97 percent package" although garment items comprise 95 percent of Bangladeshi exports to the US in a year.

As a result, Bangladeshi exporters face 15.62 percent duty on export of apparel items to the US markets although some competing countries like China, Vietnam, Pakistan and India face much less.

The US government does not allow GSP on apparel items from any country and the duty differs from one country to another.

In 2012, the total value of imports

from Bangladesh to US under GSP was \$34.7 million. The top imports under GSP from Bangladesh included tobacco, sports equipment, porcelain china and plastic products.

The GSP programme saved American companies nearly \$730 million in import duties in 2016 and is on track to save even more in 2017, according to American Apparel Footwear Association (AAFA).

When GSP expired from August 2013 to July 2015, US companies paid \$1.3 billion extra in taxes while awaiting congressional reauthorisation, AAFA said.



HUAWEI BANGLADESH

Aaron, country director at Device Business Department of Huawei Technologies (Bangladesh) Ltd, and Ziauddin Chowdhury, deputy country director, launch Huawei Mate 10 Pro, the world's first smartphone with artificial intelligence, at Sonargaon Hotel in Dhaka yesterday. The set equipped with Kirin 970 chipset, a 6GB RAM and a 4,000mAh battery is priced at Tk 80,900.

No cheer for cement industry in 2017

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Later, many of them, especially the small ones located in Mongla, Khulna, Jessore and the North Bengal areas, shuttered for their lack of financial muscle to compete with the big players, rising production costs, disadvantageous location and shortage of utility supply.

Now, the market is dominated by global giants like Holcim, Lafarge, Insee and Heidelberg and sure-footed local players.

Bangladesh's annual demand for cement is estimated to be about 25 million tonnes, according to industry insiders.

But, the combined effective pro-

duction capacity of the active cement manufacturers is more than 43 million tonnes and the installed capacity is nearly 50 million tonnes.

Yet, some makers continue to expand their capacity in anticipation of spiralling demand in future.

For instance, this year, manufacturers such as Aman and Crown have increased their capacity by 3.2 million tonnes and 1.1 million tonnes respectively.

And some other makers -- Shah Cement, Shun Shing Group and Premier -- are working to enhance their capacity in the incoming year.

The market is oversaturated and yet the big players are on an expansion

spree, said Shankar Roy, adviser of Crown Cement and a former general manager of Holcim Bangladesh.

"We are in a dilemma as we cannot pass on the increased production costs to customers due to huge competition," he added.

Additionally, Mostafa Kamal, chairman of Meghna Group of Industries that owns Fresh Cement, pointed out the government move to limit the weight on the roads and highways as another blow for the cement manufacturers.

"We used to carry 400 bags of cement in a truck. Now, we cannot take more than 200 bags."



STANDARD BANK

Kazi Akram Uddin Ahmed, chairman of Standard Bank, opens a foreign currency exchange booth of the bank at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka on Tuesday. Mamun-Ur-Rashid, CEO, was present.



JAMUNA BANK

Md Tazul Islam, a lawmaker and a director of Jamuna Bank, and Md Ismail Hosain Siraji, chairman of the bank, open the bank's 119th branch at Nangalkot in Comilla.