

Thai Group Wants Rice Alliance

With the rice price soaring in tandem with the skyrocketing oil price, Thailand's largest enterprise has called on the government to form an OPEC-like alliance on rice to elevate its price.



According to Bernama news agency, CP Group chairman, Dhanin Chearavanont, said Thailand, the world's biggest rice exporter, should approach three major rice-producing countries, namely China, Vietnam and India, to form the alliance similar to the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). "Today Vietnam has halted its export of rice for fear of domestic shortage.

China alone doesn't have excess rice for export, while India may have some rice surplus for exports in the coming years. So why don't we join hands with those three countries to improve prices," said Dhanin.

Ranked by Forbes as Thailand's third wealthiest person last year with net worth of \$2.4 billion, Dhanin made the proposal when addressing senior policy makers of the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, recently.

Swiss Banks Rethink Their Ways

Switzerland's banking sector is now under intense scrutiny and undergoing serious soul-searching after its two biggest banks got caught in the subprime crisis, AFP wrote on Sunday.

The country's biggest bank UBS has taken write-downs of more than \$37 billion, earning the dubious distinction of being the world's worst-hit group. Switzerland's second biggest bank, Credit Suisse, tumbled into the red in the first quarter as it too was badly hit, promising a more cautious approach in the future as some observers called for radical reforms in a system "rotten to the core."

In a speech on Friday to mark the Swiss National Bank's centenary, the country's top central banker Jean-Pierre Roth said a rethink of corporate governance and a strengthening of rules was vital to maintain the reputation of Switzerland's as a top flight financial center.

Professor Didier Sornette from the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich warned that any action to address "this problem of greed" has to cut right across the industry to have any effect. "You can't blame Credit Suisse or UBS for chasing higher profits through higher risks because they were playing the same game as the rest of the sector."

Strong Demand For Mobile Phones

Global demand for mobile phones remains strong, despite economic uncertainty in rich nations and rising food prices in poorer countries.



Consultancy firm Strategy Analytics says 282 million handsets were shipped worldwide in the first three months of 2008, up 14 percent from a year ago, BBC reported.

The growth was driven by rising demand in markets such as Africa and Asia. Nokia maintained its dominant position with a 40.9-percent market share but shipments of LG and Samsung phones grew fastest. Motorola, Sony Ericsson and Apple lost market share in the quarter. "Motorola's 10-percent global market share is at the lowest level since our records began," Strategy Analytics said. "It is in real danger of being overtaken by LG."

Demand for mobile phones was most brisk in emerging markets, particularly in Africa and Asia.

Toronto Hit by Strike

Toronto's metro and bus workers launched a surprise strike Saturday after rejecting a tentative labor agreement, forcing residents of Canada's biggest city to drive or walk. About 65 percent of the members of the union representing 9,000 public transit workers voted against the three-year, tentative agreement with the Toronto Transit Commission, which moves 1.5 million commuters per day, AFP wrote.

Union chief Bob Kinnear said the strike was launched at midnight without giving a 48-hour warning.

Toronto Mayor David Miller called on Ontario province lawmakers to quickly adopt legislation to force the transit workers to resume work.

Ontario's Premier Dalton McGuinty has recalled the legislature for a rare Sunday session so the government can pass legislation that will force Toronto transit workers back to work. Many of the 1.4 million people who use Toronto's transit system were forced to walk, call cabs or scramble to find other ways to get around Saturday after the 9,000 members of the Amalgamated Transit Union walked out at midnight, hours after rejecting a tentative contract proposal Friday night.

All three provincial parties said Saturday they'll pass the legislation but it was not immediately clear if the legislation would pass before Torontonians' busy Monday morning commute.

News in Brief

Nigerian Bakers Plan Strike

Bakers in Nigeria plan an eight-day strike to protest high prices for flour and sugar. At the end of the action, the price of bread is likely to rise 25 percent, the Association of Master Bakers and Caterers was quoted by UPI as saying.

The strike would run from May 5 to May 12, the Lagos Guardian reported. Chief Bayo Folarin, the head of the association, told the newspaper that bakers in Lagos have already stopped producing bread. Bread prices have risen in the country about 25 percent a year for the past three years.

Folarin said bakers plan to petition the government to keep flour prices down. "Besides, we are pleading with the government to look into the plight of bakers to prevent the collapse of the industry," he said.

Mittal Still Wealthiest in Britain



Indian-born steel tycoon Lakshmi Mittal remains the wealthiest person in Britain, AFP wrote.

His 27.7 billion pounds (\$54.9 billion, 35.1 billion euros), up 8.5 billion pounds on last year, keeps him topping the pile for the fourth year running. The Sunday Times newspaper's 2008 annual Rich List said. And the kingdom's super-rich just keep getting richer, said the respected annual publication. The top 1,000 multi-millionaires sit on a fortune of 412.8 billion pounds and have added nearly 53 billion pounds to their wealth in the last 12 months.

Britain is home to 75 billionaires—up from 68 in 2007—of whom 40 were born abroad. Of the top 10, only three were born in Britain. Mittal is followed by Russian oil tycoon Roman Abramovich (11.7 billion pounds) and the Duke of Westminster (seven billion pounds).

Mozambique Sets Up New Food Panel

Mozambique is setting up a new government committee to tackle food shortages by boosting agriculture in the southern African state, President Armando Guebuza said. "We need to increase our production rate of cereals and rice in order to avert a food crisis," Guebuza told reporters. "It is a great challenge that we face."

Mozambique has vast fertile lands but imports 400,000 tons of wheat and 350,000 tons of rice each year, AFP wrote.

Singapore Collects 4th A380



Singapore Airlines has taken delivery of its fourth Airbus A380 plane, the world's biggest passenger jet, which left Toulouse, France, on Saturday, Airbus said. The aircraft, delivered "on time," will service the first commercial link between Singapore and Tokyo, and is due to start flying the route on May 20, management said, AFP reported.

The three giant airships already in the skies service London and Sydney flights. As with the existing craft, Singapore Airlines has restricted its 853 capacity to seating for 471 passengers, including 12 suites with full beds.

The first A380 jet arrived in Singapore a year and a half late, in October 2007, after it was delayed by problems including electrical wiring glitches. It launched the first commercial flight from Singapore to Sydney later that month.

A second delivery took place on Jan. 11 with the third at the start of March.

UK Energy Market Affected North Sea Oil Pipeline Closed

A major North Sea pipeline supplying around 40 percent of Britain's oil and gas shut down Sunday as workers at a key oil refinery began a two-day strike, energy giant BP announced.

The walkout began at 6:00 a.m. at the Grangemouth refinery, west of Edinburgh, as a convoy of tankers headed from Europe to keep Scotland moving throughout the industrial action, AFP reported.

The Forties pipeline was closing, operator BP said, due to the industrial action by 1,200 workers striking in a row over pensions.

The key pipeline brings more than 700,000 barrels of crude oil ashore every day, supplying around 40 percent of Britain's oil and gas, plus international markets.

It is powered by the refinery, which operator Ineos has already shut down. Grangemouth supplies Scotland, Northern Ireland and northern England.

A spokeswoman for the Unite trade union confirmed the strike was going ahead.

"We understand the membership is standing strong, but we're ready to discuss a solution at any time," she said.

Offshore oil industry body Oil and Gas UK urged ministers to intervene, saying the pipeline closure would cost the economy 50 million pounds (63 million euros, \$100 million) per day in lost production, with the Treasury hit hardest.

"It is now time for the UK government at the highest level to step in and take all the necessary actions to ensure that the country is not held to ransom in this manner," said chief executive Malcolm Webb.

However, ministers insisted there would be enough fuel to go round, so long as people did not panic buy. However, some Scottish petrol stations have already run dry, while others have brought in rationing or price



hikes to keep panic buying down.

The Scottish government announced Sunday that around 65,000 tons of fuel, mostly diesel, was being shipped into Scotland from European ports such as Rotterdam, Amsterdam and Gothenburg.

Scotland consumes around 6,000 tons of diesel per day.

"We will have ample fuel supplies to see Scotland through this dispute and well into May," said First Minister Alex Salmond. "This will provide extra reassurance for

consumers and businesses alike as we look ahead to the coming working week. Supplies are still flowing across the country ahead of these arrivals. No doubt there will be some difficulties through the early part of the week as we wait the reopening of the Grangemouth facility. However, the required fuel for Scotland is on the way."

Britain's Business Secretary John Hutton said, "There is plenty of petrol and diesel in Scotland to meet demand during this period of time. But

of course there is going to be a challenge if people change the way that they consume fuel."

It is the first time in more than 70 years that a British refinery was shut down due to a strike. Some 70 oil fields feed into the Forties pipeline. Around two-thirds of oil from the pipeline is immediately exported.

Oil prices Friday: in London, Brent North Sea crude for June rose two dollars to \$116.34 a barrel after earlier crossing the key 117 dollar mark.