



Renewable energy project wins major UN prize for Laos

A Lao project that brings affordable solar energy to rural communities is the joint winner of the prestigious 2008 UN Environment Programme (UNEP) Sasakawa Prize.

Sunlabob Rural Energy Ltd rents solar systems and solar lanterns to families in 73 villages across Laos at a lower



Good day sunshine: installation of a solar energy system in Luang Namtha province, Laos

price than that for using kerosene lamps. Sunlabob now hopes to expand the scheme to Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia and Bhutan.



Australian's nightmare: a boy out for a quiet ride in downtown Hanoi

Kitsch bike craze seduces Vietnam's new generation

Olive green shirts and black bone-shakers may have been good enough for their parents but today's young Vietnamese fancy something a bit more distinctive for a trip around town. Hence the current fashion for turning their bicycles into mobile works of burlesque art.

Urban two wheelers are being customised with everything from plastic flowers to feather boas in a no-holds-barred carnival of bad taste.

Techno blasts from MP3 players rigged to mobile speakers to the amusement, disgust or bafflement of bystanders, as groups of multi-coloured cyclists weave their way through crowded city streets.

Nobody knows where the fad originated, but it is being seen as yet another manifestation of Vietnamese youngsters' desire to eclipse their past.

Singapore offers workers one-off inflation bonus

Civil servants in Singapore will be looking forward to a flusher than expected July after the National Wages Council



High rise: workers get a second chance to do that shopping

recommended a "one-off lump-sum payment" to help workers cope with inflation. Singapore's largest employer, its government, said its staff will receive sums of \$100 to \$200, along with their mid-year bonus. Several private companies have joined the scheme, targeting workers who earn less than the average salary of \$2,500.

Dutch experts to nurture Vietnam export drive

Last month saw the start of a three-year programme to train Vietnamese fruit and vegetable exporters in how to access the lucrative European Union (EU) produce market.

Organised by a Dutch agency, the project will raise marketing skills and quality control in the industry. Similar

initiatives have helped other developing countries achieve up to 17% export growth to the economic bloc, which imported a total of \$46.6 billion of fruit and vegetables last year.

Vietnam exported \$300m of fruit and vegetables last year, with the majority going to China. Only a negligible amount went to the EU because of local producers' lack of familiarity with the European market and a failure to reach its higher product specifications.

The ministry of agriculture and rural development plans to bring another 1m hectares of the nation's land under fruit and vegetables as it aims to double overall exports by 2010, and reach \$1 billion by 2015.



Strange fruit: kumquat plants, used as decorations during the Lunar New Year, for sale on a street in Hanoi

Indonesia brooding over bird flu

Indonesia's standoff with the World Health Organisation (Who) eased a little with the country's health ministry stating that it will announce new bird flu deaths "on a monthly basis". Indonesia, which has tallied more human deaths than any other country, is seen as a potential hotspot for a pandemic.

Its reluctance to announce deaths as they happen is due, according to health minister Siti Fadilah Supari, to a desire to accentuate the progress being made in the fight against the virus. Supari pointed to

a "declining trend" in cases, which stand at 18 in the first six months of 2008, down from 27 in the same period of 2007.

Supari has refused to share new virus samples with the Who since January 2007 in the fear they will be used to "produce a vaccine the country cannot afford". This makes it impossible for international scientists to be sure the virus is not morphing into a more dangerous form.



Head count: Indonesia is home to nearly half the world's 242 recorded bird flu fatalities

Loan earmarked for farming sector

In the hope of arresting escalating food prices, the Philippine government is negotiating a \$70m loan from the Asian Development Bank to enhance farm productivity and reduce import dependency. Last year, the country imported 16% of its rice requirement from Vietnam and Thailand. Rice prices, aggravated by poor weather and hoarding by traders, have risen by nearly 50% since January.

The loan will be used to improve the agricultural infrastructure and its technological capacity to boost production. This should help cater to the country's growing population.

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