

Tajikistan launches \$4 bln dam to end power shortage

● The power plant is expected to reach capacity of 3,600 megawatts

● Tajikistan raised \$500 million from an inaugural international bond

AFP | Rogun, Tajikistan

Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon yesterday inaugurated what is expected to be the world's tallest hydro-electric power plant, a \$3.9 billion project that will turn the impoverished country into a key power producer in Central Asia. In a colourful ceremony deep in the Pamir mountains, the Tajik leader pushed a large symbolic button to applause from the audience to mark the first of six turbines in the Rogun hydroelectric dam going online.

Men in hard hats danced to songs about the dam and waved national flags.

"Rogun is light, Rogun is glory!" went one of the songs.

The power plant is expected to reach capacity of 3,600 meg-



A general view of the Rogun hydro-electric dam, about 100 km northeast of the Tajik capital Dushanbe,

awatts -- the equivalent of three nuclear power plants -- when it is completed in a decade.

The power plant will double energy production in the country of nearly nine million people, alleviating a long-lasting, debilitating national energy deficit. Surplus energy will be sold to neighbours such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and Uzbekistan.

Built on the Vakhsh River in southern Tajikistan, the plant is expected to reach a height of 335 metres (1,099 feet) when completed, becoming the world's tallest hydro-electric dam.

Today, Rogun -- overseen by

the Italian company Salini Impregilo -- is still a vast construction site, with rocky earth covering the territory from which the powerful Vakhsh was diverted.

In 2016, Rakhmon, a former collective farm boss, climbed into a bulldozer at a groundbreaking for the dam, in a sign of the president's personal attachment to the scheme.

Plans to build a dam in southern Tajikistan date back to the Soviet era, but the project was scaled up in recent years.

In 2017, Tajikistan raised \$500 million from an inaugural international bond to help finance the

construction.

Authorities hope that when the project gains momentum it will generate money to finance further construction.

Before the ceremony, Rakhmon discussed the construction of the plant with Cyril Muller, World Bank vice president for Europe and Central Asia.

'National consolidation'

Observers say the project is hugely significant for a country that lost tens of thousands of people in a civil war in the 1990s when rebel groups, including Islamists, rose up against the



If it reaches the planned height of 335 metres, the dam will be 30 metres taller than the recently-built Jinping-I Dam in China and 35 metres taller than Tajikistan's own Soviet-era Nurek dam, also on the Vakhsh River.

The project has a number of risks.

Observers warn that the Tajik authorities do not appear to concern themselves with the environmental sensitivities of Rogun.

It is located "in a highly seismic area, and several geological studies have warned about the risks of building such a large dam in this setting," Filippo Menga, a lecturer in human geography at the University of Reading in the United Kingdom, told AFP.

Geopolitical tensions surrounding the project have, for the moment, subsided in a region that suffers from water scarcity.

Uzbekistan's late leader Islam Karimov once hinted that his downstream agriculture-dependent country might go to war over Rogun and a similar project in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan.

But Uzbek opposition to the dam has evaporated since Karimov's death in 2016.

Representatives of Uzbekistan's state energy company Uzbekenergo attended the inauguration and the country of 32 million people could one day become a client.

S.Korea says too early to restart industrial zone with North



Cho Myoung-gyon

Washington, United States

South Korea said Thursday it would not restart an industrial zone with North Korea until its neighbor moves to give up nuclear weapons, although it voiced hope for progress.

Cho Myoung-gyon, the South's unification minister, said Seoul was abiding by international sanctions on Pyongyang despite President Moon Jae-in's calls for a step-by-step easing of pressure.

"One thing I would like to highlight here is that we are not going to open the Kaesong industrial complex soon," Cho said on a visit to Washington.

Kaesong -- a border industrial zone in which South Korean companies enjoyed low-wage labor and the North's government earned badly needed revenue -- was one of the most visible signs of reconciliation that followed the landmark 2000 visit to Pyongyang by Kim Dae-jung, the South's first liberal president.

Facebook plans independent body for calls on content

San Francisco, United States

Facebook announced Thursday it is creating an independent body to make potentially precedent-setting calls on what content should be yanked from the social network.

The announcement came as Facebook reported it has ramped up its ability to quickly detect "hate speech" and other posts violating community rules, with the leading social network under pressure from regulators in various countries and activists to root out abusive and inappropriate content.

"I have come to believe that we shouldn't be making so many decisions about free expression and safety on our own," Facebook chief executive Mark Zuckerberg said in a media briefing.

Content spied by artificial intelligence software or reported by users is now reviewed by an internal system that Facebook has been ramping up.

An independent body to be constituted in the coming year will act as a "higher court" of sorts, considering appeals of content removal decisions made by the social network, Zuckerberg said.

The composition of the appeals body along with how to keep it independent while remaining in line with Facebook principles and policies was to be determined in the coming year.

Facebook also planned next year to begin releasing content removal summaries quarterly



"I have come to believe that we shouldn't be making so many decisions about free expression and safety on our own"

MARK ZUCKERBERG
FACEBOOK CHIEF EXECUTIVE

in a tempo on par with earnings reports, according to executives.

"We have made progress getting hate, bullying and terrorism off our network," Zuckerberg said.

"It's about finding the right balance between giving people a voice and keeping people safe."

Challenges faced by the California-based social network include the fact that people naturally tend to engage with more sensational content that, while perhaps at the edge of violating Facebook policies, are unhealthy for civilized discourse, according to Zuckerberg.

"We see this in cable news and tabloids too," Zuckerberg said. "A lot of our work is to insure that borderline content that comes close to violating our content gets less attention not more."

Bullying represents a tougher challenge to AI systems, because it tends to be personal

and subjective. For example, someone might playfully mock a friend in a post that could also be interpreted to be mean.

Detecting bullying or hate can also require understanding of the gamut of languages used at Facebook, along with cultural contexts.

"We are getting better at proactively identifying violating content before anyone reports it, specifically for hate speech and violence and graphic content," Facebook said in the new transparency report.

"But, there are still areas where we have more work to do."

Facebook said that since its last transparency report, the amount of hate speech detected proactively, before anyone reported it, has more than doubled.

"The single biggest improvement comes from AI and machine learning," said product management vice president Guy Rosen.

UK supermarket's viral orangutan ad slammed by oil giant

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

A British supermarket chain's viral commercial about an orangutan left homeless because of deforestation from palm oil planting was slammed as a cheap publicity stunt by a major industry body yesterday.

The Christmas ad -- which features a cartoon orangutan telling a little girl that its jungle home had been destroyed -- has racked up millions of views on social media and sparked the trending hashtag #NoPalmOilChristmas on Twitter.

The multi-billion-dollar palm oil industry was not impressed by the Iceland ad, dubbed "Rang-tan", which calls for consumers to be aware of the environmental impact of the world's most widely used vegetable oil.

"Banning palm oil is not the

solution. Boycotting is not the solution," Darrel Webber, chief executive of the Malaysia-based Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), said yesterday.

"Retailers' margins are very small these days. The cheapest way to get publicity is the best way for them," he added.

Frozen food specialist Iceland has previously announced it would stop using palm oil, found in everything from margarine and biscuits to soap and shampoo, over concerns that it causes widespread environmental destruction.

"We have not removed palm oil from our own label food as 'a marketing gimmick', but to raise public awareness of the continuing destruction of the rainforest," Iceland managing director Richard Walker said in an email to Bloomberg News.



A scene from Iceland Foods' viral commercial. (Courtesy of Iceland Foods)