BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

ASIA REPORTS

First Quarter 2009

Volume: 2. No.-1

Reports of February, 2009

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BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

ASIA REPORT

February 04, 2009

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BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

SOUTH & EAST ASIA and GCC & Fertile Crescent

Nadia Tasleem

Weekly Report from 26 December 2008 to 30 January 2009

Presentation: 4 February 2009

This report is based on the review of news items focusing on political, economic, social and geo-strategic developments in various regions namely; South Asia, East Asia, GCC and Fertile Crescent from 26 December 2008 to 30 January 2009 as have been collected by interns.

Summary

South Asia:

Political Front:

After winning 9th Parliamentary elections in ***Bangladesh***, 258 members from winning coalition sworn in as MPs on 3 January 2009; three days later, leader of Awami League Sheikh Haseena Wajid took oath as new Premier of Bangladesh on 6 January 2009. Later on first Parliamentary session was held on 25 January that was not being attended by opposition party i.e. BNP. Besides that Upazila elections finally held on 22 January amidst few incidents of clashes. Though election in six upazila got cancelled however took place successfully in rest of the 475 upazila areas under strong security arrangements as almost 5 lakh security persons were deployed all across the country. AL seems to be at upper end till last results came up. Newly elected regime seems to be keen to bring reforms as is facing some serious challenges because of energy crisis, global economic recession and terrorism. Hence efforts are being made to uplift economy, enhance energy sources and counter terrorism. Government has requested various states to extend support in order to meet these challenges.

Month began with meeting of ***Srilankan*** cabinet announcing to ban LTTE and associated organizations by declaring it to be a terrorist outfit. Along with UN many states of the world put

great emphasize on the need to bring stability in the region. Crisis remained at peak the whole month. By the end of last month Srilankan troops finally entered into main operation centre of LTTE i.e. Mullaittiuvu, bringing an end to their decade-long domination of the country's North. Main issue now seems to be about the safety of a large number of Civilian Tamils who are being made hostage by LTTE in Northern region. UN, Sweden, EU, Tamils of Tamil Nadu, India and many other countries have been trying to exert pressure on LTTE to give safe passage civilian Tamils. At ***Nepali*** political front two major partners in the coalition government, Unified CPN (Maoist) and CPN (UML), have agreed to promulgate the ordinances only after consultation with parties, including the main opposition Nepali Congress. As a result the first meeting of the central committee of the unified CPN-Maoist has formed 45-member politburo and 15-member secretariat. Meanwhile Constituent Assembly (CA) members are set to tour around the country to collect public opinion as part of writing the new constitution. All the while leader of UML has warned Maoists to leave their feudal and fascist activities otherwise will have to face grave consequences. Preparations for upcoming Parliamentary elections are on full swing in ***Maldives***. President Nasheed had been accused for his indirect involvement in upcoming elections; he however denied accusation and claimed that he would remain stick to his party hence would be directly involved in elections. Meanwhile Nasheed's regime has been accused for its failure to deal with economic crisis. After extensive effort by UN envoy Ibrahim Gambari meeting was held between him and key opposition leader Aung Sun Su Ki in ***Myanmar***. During meeting Su Ki asked UN envoy to put efforts for immediate release of political prisoners.

India:

Preparations for upcoming elections are on the way in ***India***. In this regard various rounds of talks between Congress and Samajwadi Party have been held to sort out chances to form a coalition yet hasn't reached at any conclusion over seat sharing issue. CPI (M) has claimed to be fully prepared to contest elections all alone. Meanwhile bi-elections for eight seats took place on 27 December 2008, in which BJP won 5 seats. However Nandigram went to polls on 5 January amidst high security ending in Congress' victory.

Tension between India and Pakistan that erupted because of Mumbai attacks on 26/11 has not totally dissolved till now. First Pakistan's dual stance regarding identity of Ajmal Kasab grabbed attention; later on, Indian reports based on so-called evidences came in focus. Pakistan has

promised to carry 10 days investigation to find truth in Indian accusations. Along with Indian high officials various countries have been asking Pakistan to take serious action to curb terrorism. Pakistan had also been asked to ban all Jihadi organizations.

At domestic front five people were killed and over 50 injured in three blasts set off by insurgent outfit ULFA in Guwahati. Meanwhile security officials remained at high alert amidst serious warnings by Maoists at New Year eve.

Moving towards Kashmir; elections were held peacefully. Anti-India groups boycotted elections by claiming that India considers these elections to be a referendum which is in fact not true. The National Conference emerged the single largest party by getting 28 seats in Kashmir Assembly elections, where voters turn out was over 60%, hence has been hailed by Indian government. It is followed by People's Democratic Party with 21 seats, Congress with 17 seats and BJP with 11 seats. Since the announcement of result process of government formation started. Finally on 5 January 2009 the National Conference president Mr Omar Abdullah was sworn in as the chief minister of Jammu & Kashmir, which now makes him the youngest chief minister of the state. Ten other ministers of the National Conference-Congress-led coalition government were also sworn in. However the former Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, Farooq Abdullah, on the same date took over as president of the National Conference, a position he handed over to his son, Omar Abdullah, in 2002.

Two other potent developments include a fierce gun battle between security forces and separatist militants in the dense mountainous forest in frontier Poonch district of Jammu and Kashmir that continued for more than 60 hours in which seven people; four militants and three security personnel, have been killed. Meanwhile two militants, including a top commander of the Al Badr outfit, and two jawans were killed in separate encounters in the Kashmir Valley. Secondly in a statement released to Srinagar-based journalists, a Lashkar-e-Taiba spokesperson said it was willing to terminate its terror campaign in return for international intervention on the Kashmir issue.

Geo-strategic Front:

Israeli strikes against Gaza strip:

Government of ***Bangladesh*** strongly condemned Israeli act of aggression against Palestine. The teachers and students of ***Dhaka*** University burnt effigy of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert on the campus in protest against Israeli massacres in Gaza. ***Srilanka*** asked Israel to end air raids upon Gaza strip. Congress and Left parties of ***India*** have also strongly condemned Israel for its aggression against Palestine.

Other developments:

Senior Unified CPN (Maoist) leader Mohan Baidya 'Kiran' lashed out at India for conspiring to disintegrate ***Nepal*** by using Madhesh as a weapon, and added that the people will fight against it. Meanwhile the Maoists have also accused India and America of constantly intervening in Nepal's sovereignty and internal affairs. Japan has extended full support to restore agriculture in ***Myanmar*** after Nargis cyclone.

India:

India has been focusing on enhancing defence ties with both USA and Russia. Meanwhile efforts to resolve border issues with China and Bangladesh are on their way. Signing of MoU with Malaysia is yet another significant development. Likewise Indian growing ties with Afghanistan also remained in focus. Above all views given by British foreign secretary David Miliband regarding Mumbai blasts considering it to be an outcome of Indian policies in Kashmir, became a serious point of concern for India.

Social Front:

Almost 2000 ***Bangladeshi*** employees who were sent on forced retirement by previous government have requested new government to reinstate them. At least 12 lakh people get afflicted with tobacco related diseases every year in the country. Tourist arrivals in ***Nepal*** via air in the month of January 2009 have decreased by 15.8 percent to 21,944 in comparison to the same month last year.

India:

Government of Karnataka has been asked to implement high Court decision regarding safeguard of Christian community living in ***India***. Meanwhile anti-dowry decision being taken by a village in

Kerala also remained significant. Above all, a recently released movie (as a result of joint collaboration of India & Britain), 'slum-dog millionaire' addressing issues of poor Indians living in slum areas has brought huge criticism by many within India. In response to that Indian star Shahrukh Khan said that Indians should be tolerant enough to see reality and should look at this movie with a positive perspective.

Economic front:

The number of ***Bangladeshis*** cleared for overseas employment in 2008 exceeded 8, 75,000 creating a new record. A record amount of nearly 9 billion US dollar has also been received as remittances in 2008. Jute, leather goods, handicrafts and other household appliances are considered as main source of attraction for visitors. Meanwhile the government decided to buy 13 lakh tonnes of crude oil and one and a half lakh tonnes of urea fertilizer to meet the domestic demands. Global economic recession along with long term insurgency has adversely affected ***Srilankan*** economy like that of many other countries. The United Nations in Sri Lanka has provided US$125 million in development aid to Sri Lankans in 2008. Due to difficulties in obtaining United States dollar from local banks operating in ***Maldives*** most business companies are buying US dollars from the black market at values exceeding Rf. 14. With a litre of petrol now costing Nu 38.53 and diesel Nu 30.97 in Thimphu, ***Bhutanese*** are paying the lowest price for fuel since January 2005. The Department of Trade (DoT), ministry of economic affairs announced the new price of petrol and diesel in the country after the fuel rates dropped in India.

India:

Moving towards ***Indian*** economic front inflation, fuel prices and export issues remained point of concern. Since mid-December the rate of inflation kept on declining hence reached at 6.61 per cent in mid-December from 6.84 per cent a week earlier owing to a fall in the prices of certain food articles and some manufactured goods on account of the cascading effect of fuel price cuts and the four per cent across-the-board reduction in excise duty. As New Year began inflation, for the first time in 10 months, fell below six per cent, and eased to 5.24% in mid January due to the declining prices of manufactured goods and food items; however again rise up to 5.64% by end of the month. Meanwhile passing on the benefit of the falling crude oil prices, the Central government cut the retail price of petrol by Rs. 5 a litre and that of high speed diesel by Rs. 2 a

litre. As far as country's trade is concerned the New Year began on a depressing note with official estimates showing a fall of 9.9 per cent in exports for the end of 2008, seen as a clear consequence of dull consumer demand in the USA and other major markets in Europe and rest of the world following the financial meltdown. Apart from above mentioned issues, the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India claims that India along with China, Russia and South Korea would emerge stronger out of the current crisis as they enjoy strong economic foundations based on foreign exchange reserves, higher GDP growth rates per capita and sound monetary policy measures.

East Asia:

Political Front:

Indonesia has announced 8 July 2009 to be the date for Presidential election. President and Vice President have recently paid visit to various regions; that has been perceived as an effort to win votes for upcoming elections. At ***Malaysian*** political front most significant development appeared to be by-elections in the Malay heartland of Terengganu; that was held on 17 January. Ruling coalition lost that election while Mohammed Abdul Wahid Endut, candidate of PAS, won by 2,631 votes in a battle which saw a turnout of almost 80%. Even Chinese and Indians voted in favor of the Islamic Party of Malaysia being frustrated with ruling regime. Meanwhile efforts of PAS to create pressure on government to implement Hudud laws also remained in focus. Government however refused to cooperate with PAS by saying that they would implement it at their own in accordance with their perception. Meanwhile Anwar Ibrahim has been asked to adopt clear policy regarding PAS' stance about Hudud laws. President of ***Philippines*** Arroyo Macapagal has declared economy, national security and peace process to be main challenges being confronted by her country in the Year 2009. As far as Muslim rebels are concerned they on one hand have refused to accept communists' offer to join hands with them in order to topple ruling regime. On the other hand some of the key Muslim rebels have denied any hope to sign peace deal with ruling regime. Meanwhile Muslims in Mindanao have warmly welcomed American President by expressing positive hope regarding future of Mindanao. First visit by ***Thai*** PM Abhisit Vejjajiva to Southern region can be regarded as the most significant development in the respective country. He promised to ensure human rights in the region. All the while PM has warned his countrymen about likelihood of further economic recession hence asked protestors

to end demonstrations. In case of ***Laos,*** European Union (EU) has announced to provide 1.6 million Euro for the programme on good governance and to strengthen the rule of law in Laos. The Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) and Human Rights Party (HRP), which are two main opposition parties in the ***Cambodian*** National Assembly, have agreed to establish a political alliance called the Democratic Movement of Change (DMC) for the upcoming elections that have to be held in 2012 and 2013. Leaders of these parties have also requested intellectuals and democratic supporters to join the DMC for upcoming elections. Cambodian PM Hun Sen however declared this alliance to be fragile hence claimed that it will vanish soon.

Geo-strategic Front:

Israeli strikes against Gaza strip:

Gaza issue grabbed attention of all East Asian states through this period. To begin with ***Indonesia*** government sent a 200,000-USD package of medicines to Palestine. Indonesia fully welcomed the United Nations Security Council's resolution on Israeli attacks on Palestine asking for ceasefire. As far as common public is concerned some 100 Islamist protesters rallied outside the country's only synagogue on Jan. 7, demanding its closure and expulsion of the Jewish community in response to Israel's offensive in the Gaza Strip. ***Malaysia*** gave an ultimatum to the United Nations Security Council to come up with a resolution to condemn Israel on its brutal aggression against Palestine before UN actually passed the resolution. All the while the Education Ministry has set up a Palestinian Humanitarian Fund in conjunction with its "One Malaysia, One Voice" campaign. A Muslim civil society group in ***Philippines*** in Marawi City showed its solidarity with their Muslim brothers by condemning the Israeli attacks on the Palestinian people and urged the Arab world through their different embassies and consulates in Manila to unite against the reported Israeli aggression. ***Vietnam*** requested Israel to cease all military acts and to withdraw from the Gaza Strip. However after the end of crisis ***Singapore*** welcomed Israel's declaration of a ceasefire in Gaza. Meanwhile various religious groups namely Baha'is of Singapore, Singapore Buddhist Federation, the Catholic Archdiocese of Singapore, National Council of Churches of Singapore, Hindu Endowments Board, Sikh Advisory Board, Singapore Taoist Federation and Harmony Centre have jointly raised funds for relief efforts in Gaza.

Other developments:

Thailand and ***Cambodia*** have agreed to hold more talks to resolve a dispute over a stretch of land at their border near the 900-year-old Preah Vihear temple that spilled over into fighting last year. ***Thailand*** has extended support to East Timor's membership of ASEAN. Leaders from ***Singapore*** and Vietnam exchanged views on regional security issues and areas of defence cooperation. Meanwhile Singapore has opened the world's first border facility to weed out the threat of chemical and biological attacks. Lastly, the chief negotiators of ***Vietnam*** and China, after four days of talks in Hanoi, gave a joint statement based on complete demarcation of their land border as well as the planting of markers.

Social Front:

Many people lost their lives due to cyclone, floods and earthquakes in ***Indonesia***, during first month of this year. Meanwhile Indonesian police committed human rights violations during a deadly crackdown on protesters in a land dispute this month that killed at least one child. At ***Malaysian*** social front the only marked development appears to be government's offer to take back two citizens who are prominent terrorism suspects at the Guantánamo Bay prison after President Barack Obama ordered the closure of the facility. A large number of people in ***Philippines*** suffered great losses because of heavy floods and earthquakes in the said country. Besides that a group of Ulemas (Islamic scholars) from the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) arrived in Manila to join other moderate Muslim advocates from the Association of Southeast Nations (Asean) as participants in the 3rd International Conference of Muslim Leaders. In case of ***Thailand*** major deaths occurred because of road accidents during New Year vacations and night club fire. Growing unemployment can also be regarded as another area of concern as almost 2,863 Thai workers have reportedly lost their job in January this year and the country's higher number of unemployed is expected. Meanwhile human rights organizations have strongly accused Thai government for abusing Muslim refugees coming from Myanmar hence military has promised to investigate the issue. As far as ***Singapore's*** social front is concerned the most striking development seems to be a survey carried by OCBC Bank. This survey claims that Singaporeans are starting to step back from personal luxuries and ambitions. Instead, they are now more concerned about the basics of home, relationship and family. Floods remained major issue of concern for ***Vietnam*** as well.

Economic Front:

Indonesian government announced to reduce oil prices following the decline in global oil prices. ***Malaysian*** Muslim Groups announced to boycott Coca-Cola and other US products over the Gaza offense. Management of Coca-Cola claimed that their boycott will badly hurt the local economy and citizens hence they should review this decision. INTEL, the world's biggest computer chip maker, announced plans to close facilities in Malaysia, the ***Philippines*** and the United States. The ***Thai*** central bank reported that last year's occupation of the country's main airports by opposition supporters caused more than six billion euros worth of economic damage. The occupations, which lasted more than a week, left hundreds of thousands of foreign tourists stranded. ***Singaporean*** economy grew by 1.5% last year however inflation increased 6.5% due to higher rates of food products, housing, transport and communication. ***Vietnam's*** trade deficit widened to a record $17 billion in 2008, from $14.1 billion last year. Meanwhile Vietnam's state-owned oil and gas company PetroVietnam has reported record sales of more than $US16 billion for 2008. Besides that Vietnam is now the largest foreign investor in ***Laos,*** according to a recent survey conducted by the Overseas Investment Department under the Ministry of Planning and Investment.

Fertile Crescent:

Political Front:

As far as ***Iraqi*** political front is concerned finalization of date of provincial elections and then all sorts of preparations including security arrangements dominated the scene. Provincial council elections took place on January 31 in all Iraqi provinces, with the exception of Kirkuk and the Kurdistan region. Large number of supervisors and observors has been deployed to run the electoral process during provincial elections. Arrangements for special voting were also made in order to make security men, detainees and hospitalized people's voting possible. All the while issue of resignation of former Iraqi speaker and nomination of the new one still seems to be controversial. Elections for speakership would be held on 4 February. Meanwhile Iraqi President Jalal Talabani's call Defense Minister to develop Iraqi army's capabilities and to strengthen ties among its different units to be able to protect Iraq's security also grabbed attention. Iraqi President seriously denounced the suicide bombing attack that targeted a Shiite shrine in the city of al-Kadhemiya, where 114 pilgrims, mostly Iranians, were killed or wounded. The attack

coincides with a visit currently being paid by Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to Tehran. The issue of amendment of Higher media Council law and making of Social Security Council draft law remained important in ***Jordan***. Israeli air raids and rockets launched by Hamas dominated the scene at ***Israeli-Palestinian*** front. Israeli armed forces began operation against Gaza on 27 December 2008 on the ground that Hamas has been targeting them by rockets. They continued these air raids till 18 January 2009 killing 1,284 Palestinians (out of which 894 are civilians) while leaving almost 4,336 people wounded. However 13 Israelis including 3 civilians have been killed during the whole operation, out of which 4 were killed by friendly fire. Israeli act has faced worldwide condemnation. Muslims countries remained most prominent in this regard. Enormous pressure by various states (except the US) ultimately led UN to pass resolution asking Israel to end raids and to open Gaza blockade. Israel initially denounced UN resolution however declared unilateral ceasefire finally on 18 January. Even after ceasefire Israeli soldiers have been accused of violation of truce. Hence conflict of low intensity is still going on in the region mainly between Israeli troops and Hamas.

Geo-strategic Front:

Israeli strikes against Gaza strip:

As far as ***Iraqi*** reaction to Israeli strikes is concerned almost all factions have seriously condemned Israeli act of aggression. In this regard Iraqi Parliament called upon all Arab countries to take action against Israel. Parliament also sent aid packages to Gaza. Meanwhile the Sadrist Movement organized a demonstration in Baghdad, condemning the Israeli military operation in the Gaza Strip. They also called to raise Palestinian flags in solidarity with Gaza. Anti-Israel protests were launched in many other areas as well. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) also condemned Israeli strikes on the Gaza strip. Likewise ***Syrian*** cabinet and Peoples' assembly also condemned Israeli air raids against Palestine. Massive scale demonstrations have been launched by people belonging to various walks of life (including Christian community with the country) protesting Israeli aggression. Efforts were also made to send relief packages to innocent Palestinians. Despite sending aid packages to Palestine, Syria also discussed this issue with German, Turkey and many Arab countries and asked them to exert pressure upon Israel to end atrocities. After ceasefire Syria urged the UN to probe Israeli brutalities in order to punish her. Syria also asked Israel to open all crossing points and lift siege on Gaza. Similarly ***Lebanon*** also blamed Israel for disturbing peace of the region. Lebanese

government called for urgent Arab Summit to stress on the need to exert pressure on Israel. Economic aid has also been sent to Palestine as a symbol of solidarity. A Lebanese boat loaded with medicines and other daily use products had to go back to Lebanon after being collided with an Israeli patrol boat. At later stage Israel even accused HezbAllah for fire rockets against her hence targeted South Lebanon in response. Various factions in Lebanon however denied Israeli accusation. Students and common masses in ***Jordan*** have asked their government to end al sort of diplomatic ties with Israel amidst its air raids against Palestine. They have also boycotted from Israeli products and also from that of French products amidst Sarkozy's statement declaring Hamas to be responsible for Palestinian plight. Government has also condemned Israeli aggression. Jordan also sent truck loaded with blood units to Palestine that had been turned back by Israel. However teams of Jordanian doctors have been working there in Gaza.

Other developments:

The most significant development at geo-strategic front include ***Iraqi*** effort to boost ties with Iran and Syria; the two most controversial states in terms of US perspective. In this regard Iraqi PM's official visit to Iran and his emphasize on close bilateral relations with Tehran plus Iraqi intention to construct a new gas pipeline via Syria to Europe through the Mediterranean Sea, remained potent. Meanwhile Iraq remained active in enhancing ties with Kuwait, Jordan, Canada and Turkey. Above all US President Obama's announcement to withdraw troops from Iraq soon also grabbed attention. ***Syria*** has emphasized greatly on the need to enhance ties with Lebanon. Besides that Syrian growing relation with Iraq, Cuba, Damascus and Turkey remained in focus. Egypt has expressed grievances against Iran, Hamas and HezbAllah of ***Lebanon*** for provoking fighting over Gaza.

Social Front:

Sectarian killings have not ended in ***Iraq*** despite the relative calm most of the country currently enjoys. The violence is mostly due to powerful political factions with heavily armed militias. Some militias – such the Kurdish militias known as Peshmerga and the Shiite militias of Mehdi Army – are thought to be the strongest. The Mehdi Army of the Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr

has staged two uprisings against U.S. occupation troops and one against the Iraqi army. In many areas in the country these militias exercise more power than government troops or police forces. Besides role of armed militias few other striking social developments include; drop in unemployment rate by 15% and construction of two dams in Kirkuk region to alleviate the city's thirst for drinking water and use the surplus for irrigation. Many Arab countries including ***Lebanon*** cancelled New Year celebrations in solidarity with Palestine. At ***Jordanian*** social front two potent developments include remarkable drop in illiteracy rate from 45 per cent in 1970 to 7.9 per cent in 2008 plus health minister's enforcement of smoking ban.

Economic Front:

Finance Minister Baqer Al-Zubaidi has called on ***Iraqis*** to reduce spending and save as much as they can. The minister made the remarks in response to calls to slash public spending and a cabinet proposal to reduce salaries by up to 30%. Besides that Iraq's exports of crude oil in December 2008 reached 54.45 million barrels. Hence Iraq's oil revenues were up over 30 percent last year — to about $60 billion — despite the sharp decline in world prices in the last half of the year. At economic front ***Syrian*** efforts to boost economic ties with Gulf Countries as well as France remained potent. Hike in prices has led many people from across the globe to move towards Beirut bringing huge economic benefits for ***Lebanon***. ***Jordan's*** revenues from vegetable exports rose by 5 per cent during the first 10 months of 2008, amounting to JD237.6 million, compared to JD226.3 million the same period of 2007. Meanwhile King Abdullah has announced to implement the nationwide Agricultural Strategy in 2009 for the betterment of farmers. Besides all that the European Commission (EC) Delegation has announced to grant 454 million euros for more than 40 initiatives in the Kingdom of Jordan this year. Another potent development at this front is regarding index of economic freedom carried out by the Wall Street Journal and The Heritage Foundation. It covers 183 countries measuring 10 specific freedoms such as trade, business, investment and property rights freedoms. Jordan was ranked 51st globally and 6th regionally on the 2009 Index of Economic Freedom, showing an improvement in its international standing and a slight drop regionally compared to the 2008 index. Jordan's economic freedom score rose by 1.3 points in 2009.

GCC:

Political Front:

Bahrainian PM assured full cooperation and harmony between government and the legislative power in order to serve countrymen. After facing criticism by many MPs ***Kuwait*** swore in a new 15-member cabinet on 12 January with a few changes from the previous government which resigned in November following a dispute with parliament. New government promised to end political dispute but things still seem unresolved.

Geo-strategic Front:

Israeli strikes against Gaza strip:

OIC and GCC strongly condemned Israeli act of aggression in Gaza. Meanwhile ***UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman*** and ***Kuwait*** also condemned Israeli air raids against Palestine and urged international community to play its role in order to bring peace in the region. Gulf countries also sent aid packages to Palestine on humanitarian grounds. Saudi Arabia though initially also condemned Hamas for its rocket attacks against Israel yet later on asked all Palestinian factions to get united to counter Israeli offensive. Saudi King even blamed US for its silence on Palestinian issue.

Other developments:

Saudi King hailed US President Obama's stance regarding Middle East. He held a meeting with US President and discussed various significant issues being faced by Arab world. Besides that an Egyptian has been detained for spying by Saudi government. Egypt however denied Saudi accusation. The US President Bush signed peaceful nuclear deal with ***UAE*** few days before leaving his office. Meanwhile cooperation between UAE and Pakistan Navy also seems to be worth mentioning.

Social Front:

Labor issues dominated social front of all Gulf countries. The Federal National Council (FNC) has recommended country-wise quota for non-Arab Labour, with proportional regional allocations so as to ensure cultural diversity on the national level instead of attaining it on corporate level. The FNC also approved other recommendations pertaining to the foreign labour after lengthy discussions on the issue as well as on the impact of the new regulations of the Labour Ministry. ***Qatar*** has been declared as one of the best destination for Filipino workers. ***Saudi*** Labour Minister warned against growing racism among Saudis towards the millions of foreign workers

in the kingdom, mainly domestics. Meanwhile many Saudi women got driving licenses in Bahrain on one hand while a Saudi man got arrested for hosting a mix concert at his fun park in Mecca. Another potent development at social front is about Saudi Businessman Yasin Al-Qadi who filed a lawsuit in Washington on 16 January 2008 against US President George Bush. In fact he was wrongfully accused of financing terrorism on the basis of false information on 12 October 2001 by the Bush administration. He proved to be innocent by European Court of Justice in September 2008. Despite being safe from global job crisis, ***Bahrain*** has cut down number of jobs as cost cutting measure. Rain, storms and HIV/AIDS remained key issues at ***Omani*** front. Besides that recent report by World Bank has highly admired ***Kuwait*** human resource development.

Economic Front:

Saudi Arabia is thought to be the safest place in attracting foreign direct investments. Food prices have remarkably declined in ***Bahrain***. ***Oman*** on one hand has signed FTA with the USA while on the other hand has also enhanced economic ties with GCC. An economic boom in the ***UAE***, the world's fifth-largest oil exporter, came to an end late last year as oil prices collapsed more than $100 a barrel, regional credit markets froze and a building boom in the emirate of Dubai started to unravel. Taking ***GCC*** as a whole few developments grabbed attention; firstly the combined foreign assets of GCC governments and banking institutions are estimated to have reached $1.47 trillion by the end of 2008, according to the Institute of International Finance (IIF). Secondly, intra-GCC trade has grown rapidly at 32.4 percent over the same period, although it represents a minority share of its total trade. The significance of intra GCC trade varies between member states. Intra-GCC trade has the highest significance for Oman, representing 30 percent of all imports and 51 percent of all non-oil exports.

BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

Fertile Crescent

Aisha Rehman

From 23rd to 30th January, 2009

Presentation, February 4, 2009

Iraq

Political front (Elections)

- Obama to announce plan to pullout troops from Iraq soon - WH
- Ex-PM in Basra to canvass for National Reform Movement
- Provincial election major pillar of political system – PM
- Shams network trains 450 election monitors in Karbala
- Barazani says some parties trying to impose "dictatorship" on Iraq
- SIIC chief: Voting is religious, national duty
- Iraq, Kuwait interested in resolving pending issues
- Preparations complete for voting at Basra camps
- Romanian troops to return home on July 31 – spokesman
- 29,000 supervisors for Wassit elections
- Press syndicate wins elections' case
- 800 int'l observers monitor special voting in Baghdad
- 72,000 begin special voting in Rasafa
- Special voting is going very well – IHEC
- President heads to Sulaimaniya to meet PUK leaders
- Detainees' special voting witnessed many violations – MP
- 90% turnout in Iraq's special voting- IHEC
- Over 40 customs employees prevented from voting

Social front

- Factional violence continues in Iraq
- Feyli Kurds case trial begins
- Iraqi unemployment rate dropped by 15% in 2008

Economic front

- Turkish company to build housing compound in Karbala
- Finance Ministry finalizes fresh draft on customs tariff
- Finance minister calls on Australian companies to invest in Iraq
- 4 projects to push up production in Baghdad oil refinery
- Iraq to increase oil exports to 2 million barrels a day in 2009
- Two new dams for Kirkuk

Jordan

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- Minister of Industry Discusses Possibility of Establishing Joint Companies with CEO of Syrian-Qatari Holding Company
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- Aleppo governor underlines importance of Syrian-Turkish Cooperation
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- Alliance of Palestinian Factions: No Calm down before Opening all Crossing Points, Lifting Siege on Gaza

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- Elections 2009: Problems delay formation of electoral lists
- Lebanon dialogue talks adjourned till March 2
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- Suleiman Urges Cabinet to Handle Palestinian Bases
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Geo strategic front

- Khoury approved as Lebanon's first ambassador to Damascus

- Lebanon's defense minister in Syria for security talks
- Egypt attacks Iran and its allies Hamas and Hezbollah
- France for Role in Middle East Peace and Lebanon Stability
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- France to Withdraw Warships Serving with UNIFIL

Social front

- MTV Resumes Broadcasting March 31

Palestine and Israel

- Dozens suffered teargas inhalation during the Bil'in Weekly Demonstration
- Spanish Judge accepts PCHR lawsuit against senior Israeli officials, Israel to appeal decision
- BBC refusal to air Gaza aid appeal sparks protests
- Israeli warplanes raid Gaza-Egypt border
- Israeli forces demolish Palestinian-owned home in Jerusalem
- Israel reopens Gaza commercial crossings
- Israel cuts diplomatic ties with Venezuela
- Mitchell affirms the United States' commitment to push the peace process in the M.E
- Israel closes all Gaza border crossings
- To help controlling the Gaza Egypt borders: Germany send military experts to Egypt
- Hamas blames Israel for post truce violence
- Israeli warplanes bombard the Gaza-Egypt border line

Iraq

Political front (Elections)

Obama to announce plan to pullout troops from Iraq soon - WH

U.S. President Barack Obama's review of how to wind down the war in Iraq will conclude soon, the White House said ahead of his first Pentagon session with military

advisers. The new commander in chief scheduled an afternoon briefing at the Defense Department's headquarters with the four military service leaders, one more step toward fulfilling his promise of withdrawing all combat troops from Iraq. For both the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Obama is in the midst of hearing from military commanders and advisers about how best to proceed. Gibbs said Obama's process is deliberate as he moves toward changing the mission in Iraq. Asked when Obama will be ready to speak about his decisions on that war, Gibbs said: "I think it will be relatively soon. I don't want to set an exact date, though I think it will be relatively shortly." Defense officials have said they can meet Obama's campaign pledge, but several have indicated that a fast withdrawal could upset the fragile security now in Iraq. Obama has asked for more information behind assumptions and for additional analysis, Gates said. "I think that the president will listen to the commanders," he said. The new president also has said he would adjust his timeline if it would risk the safety of U.S. troops remaining behind to train Iraqis and fight al-Qaeda or if it would cause backsliding in Iraqi stability.

Ex-PM in Basra to canvass for National Reform Movement

Former Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari on Saturday arrived in Basra to canvass for the National Reform Movement, one week ahead of provincial council elections, scheduled to take place in 14 out of Iraq's 18 provinces.The Shiite city of Basra, the capital of Basra province, lies 590 km south of Baghdad.

Provincial election major pillar of political system – PM

Iraqi Premier Nouri al-Maliki on Saturday said from Muthanna province that the upcoming provincial election is "a major pillar of the political system." "National unity is the strong fence that opposes all challenges," al-Maliki said during a tribal conference in the province. The Iraqi government hopes that provincial election will limit acts of violence throughout the country by including a number of armed groups in the political process.

Shams network trains 450 election monitors in Karbala

The head of Shams network for election monitoring in the mid Euphrates said that 25 persons completed a training program to monitor the upcoming provincial elections, in addition to 425 others who completed similar programs during the past weeks. "The 450 monitors will work on monitoring elections, electoral campaigns, and registering violations," Hussein al-Ibrahimi told Shams network for election monitoring was formed in 2004. It consists of more than 88 Iraqi organizations. Its mission is to train election monitors throughout Iraq.

Barazani says some parties trying to impose "dictatorship" on Iraq

Iraqi Kurdistan Region President Massoud Barazani accused some "parties" of seeking to impose dictatorship on Iraq by controlling the army and police and hindering an article in the constitution that regulates solutions to disputed areas. "There are parties that want to

dictatorship back again by controlling the army and police, which we will never accept," Barazani said in a meeting in the Kurdish northern Iraq province of Duhuk with officials and notables. Speaking on relations with Baghdad, Barazani pointed out "we are waiting for the committees set up to determine and activate relations with the federal government". "We expect good results regarding the *peshmerga*, which the Kurdistan government considers part of the Iraqi army but Baghdad declines to finance," he noted Barazani's statements came in an address during a three-day visit he is now paying to Duhuk, where he met with several officials and local leaders.

SIIC chief: Voting is religious, national duty

Head of the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC) Abdelaziz al-Hakeem on Sunday said that participation in the upcoming provincial council elections, due to take place later this month, is a religious and national duty. The Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (previously known as Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)) is an Iraqi political party. Its political support comes from the country's Shiite Muslim community. It is one of the main components of the Shiite Unified Iraqi Alliance (UIA), which holds 83 seats in the 275-member parliament. In light of its gains in both elections and government appointments, the council is one of Iraq's most powerful political parties and the largest party in the Iraqi Council of Representatives.

Iraq, Kuwait interested in resolving pending issues

The Iraqi delegation to the Kuwait-based economic summit has settled some pending issues between the two countries, an official spokesperson for the Iraqi government said on Sunday, expressing the determination of both governments to develop mutual relations. In a compromise between both countries, Iraqi Airways will pay $300 million U.S. dollars to its Kuwaiti counterpart in return for dropping all lawsuits against it as well as the Iraqi government. The two sides have also tackled cross-border oilfields, Dabbagh noted, adding that an Iraqi technical delegation from the ministries of foreign affairs and oil will visit Kuwait to further discuss the issue.

Preparations complete for voting at Basra camps

Preparations are in place for the special voting process at Basra's detention camp centers, scheduled to take place on January 28, the media office of the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) in Basra said. All non-convicted detainees have the right to vote, in addition to those sentenced to less than five years. A total of 50 observers will monitor the voting process at Camp Bucca, according to the office.

Romanian troops to return home on July 31 – spokesman

The official spokesman for the Defense Ministry on Monday said that the defense minister signed the Romanian forces' withdrawal agreement according to the decision of the Iraqi cabinet number 439 and the parliament's decision number 50 of the year 2008.

"An agreement was signed to arrange the withdrawal of the 350 personnel which are stationed in Taliel base in Nassiriya and Kut," Mohamed al-Askari told Aswat al-Iraq news agency, noting that the withdrawal will start on July 31. On December 28, the Iraqi Presidential Board (PB) ratified resolution no. 50 of the year 2008 authorizing the cabinet to organize the presence of foreign forces and their withdrawal from the country. In August 2003, Romania sent over 5,200 servicemen to Iraq, of which only 350 soldiers remain in the country to provide intelligence support.

29,000 supervisors for Wassit elections

A total of 29,000 supervisors will run the electoral process during the Wassit provincial council elections on January 31, the director of the Wassit elections office said. "A total of 29,000 supervisors have been registered in the Wassit commission office to monitor the elections and register violations," Kazem Abdullah al-Shimri told "Each political bloc has the right to register 520 supervisors; two for each electoral poll out of the total 260 electoral centers," al-Shimri added. The provincial council elections are due to be held on January 31 in 14 out of 18 Iraqi provinces.

Press syndicate wins elections' case

The Iraqi Press Syndicate on Tuesday won the case brought against it by some media personnel contesting the results of its elections, held in July 2008. " the court issued its ruling in favor of the syndicate," the syndicate's lawyer, Tareq Harb, told. "The elections were found to be fair…," Harb added. Muayyad al-Lami was elected as the syndicate's chief in an election held in July 2008.

800 int'l observers monitor special voting in Baghdad

Around 800 international observers started on Wednesday morning monitoring a number of electoral centers in Baghdad and other provinces during the special elections, a media source said. The special voting day allows Iraqi security forces, detainees and hospital patients to cast ballots in the provincial elections. The polls will be held in 14 of 18 provinces. A total of 614998 people are expected to vote in the special election Wednesday, Iraqi election officials said. On Saturday, millions of people are expected to go to the polls, with 14,000 candidates competing for 440 provincial council seats.

72,000 begin special voting in Rasafa

A total of 72,000 voters started on Wednesday morning the special voting in Rasafa in Baghdad to elect the provincial council, the director of the media department of the electoral commission said Hussein al-Taei told Aswat al-Iraq news agency. The special voting day allows Iraqi security forces, detainees and hospital patients to cast ballots in the provincial elections.Judge Qassem al-Aboudi said at a press conference held earlier in central Baghdad, attended by Aswat al-Iraq news agency, that the number of voters registered in the Special Voting is 614998, and will vote in 75 electoral centers.

Special voting is going very well – IHEC

Three hundred and seventy two polling centers opened their doors throughout Iraq orning for the special voting, said a source from the operations directorate of the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC), explaining that voting is going "very well" in the centers' 1669 polling stations. "The special voting process embraces Iraqi security forces of the two ministries of defense and interior, detainees at Iraqi and U.S. prisons, and hospitalized patients," a release issued by the IHEC and received by Aswat al-Iraq news agency quoted the source. "Attendance on voting has been very high since early morning," he said. "The electoral process has been moving very smoothly, without any incidents or violations so far," he added. "Polling centers for special voting will be closed at 5:00 pm today," he explained. "Polling boxes will be then sent to counting centers per each province," he noted.

President heads to Sulaimaniya to meet PUK leaders

Iraqi President Jalal al-Talabani ill leave the Iraqi capital Baghdad for Sulaimaniya city to convene with the leadership of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), according to a presidential source. Talabani is the leader of the PUK, one of the two major parties in Iraq's Kurdistan region, along with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which is led by Kurdistan President Massoud al-Barazani.

Detainees' special voting witnessed many violations – MP

Lawmaker Shatha al-Ibosi of the Iraqi Accord Front (IAF) said that big violations took place today during the special voting of security forces servicemen, detainees, and hospitalized people. "When detainees were numbered under 400, they were prevented from voting under the pretext that a polling box's size is 400 voters," al-Ibosi told Aswat al-Iraq news agency. "At al-Adala detention center in Kadhimiya, detainees were prevented from voting under the pretext that they do not have food stuff cards," she said, adding "how will these detainees be able to access their food stuff cards while they are in prison?" "We also received a number of petitions over the phone from organizations that monitor the electoral process," she explained. "We will inform the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) and the United Nations (UN) of all of these violations," she proceeded. "We will summon the high ranking officials of the IHEC in case these violations were not amended," she noted.

90% turnout in Iraq's special voting- IHEC

The head of the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) on Wednesday revealed a 90 percent turnout in the special voting process that took place earlier today across the country. "Initial reports received by the commission showed a 21 percent turnout in Basra, 49 percent in Missan, 55 percent in Qadissiya, 50 percent in Najaf and 27 percent in Baghdad's side of al-Karkh," Faraj al-Haydari said in a press conference held at the Baghdad-based al-Rasheed Hotel. "Voters from the ministries of interior and defense, hospital inmates, prisoners and detainees cast their votes today in 347 polling centers,

which encompassed 1,699 stations," he added. Haydari said that no violations have been reported in electoral centers.

Over 40 customs employees prevented from voting

The office of the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) in Diala's Mandali district has allegedly prevented more than 40 employees in the customs department from casting their votes today, according to the department's head. "The main office of the commission's office in Mandali district, Khanaqin (155 km north of Baaquba) has prevented over 40 voters from participating in the electoral process," Col. Salah al-Anbaki told Aswat al-Iraq news agency. "Those employees were barred from voting on the pretext of not having the province's ration cards," Anbaki explained. Meanwhile, the director of the IHEC's office in the province, Aamer Lateef, denied receiving any complaints in this regard. "We have heard of violations in some electoral centers, but these are inaccurate accusations as no official complaints have been made to the commission," Lateef said.

Social front

Factional violence continues in Iraq

Sectarian killings have not ended in Iraq despite the relative calm most of the country currently enjoys. The violence is due mostly to powerful political factions with heavily armed militias. militia men stormed a house in the restive Province of Diyala killing nine members of the same family among them six women. Some militias – such the Kurdish militias known as Peshmerga and the Shiite militias of Mahdi Army – can even stand or probably beat onslaughts by the Iraqi army. The Mahdi Army of the Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr has staged two uprisings against U.S. occupation troops and one against the Iraqi army. In many areas in the country these militias exercise more power than government troops or police forces. Victims of indiscriminate fire whether by U.S. Iraqi troops are not unusual. A joint U.S. and Iraqi force killed three members of the same family among them a child. The three were standing on the roof of a house the troops were searching for weapons.

Feyli Kurds case trial begins

The trial of the 16 defendants in the Feyli Kurds case began today, the president of Iraq's Higher Criminal Court (IHCC) said on Monday. Several International organizations estimated that nearly one million Iraqi Feyli Kurds were displaced by force between the years 1970 and 1990. The defendants on this case are Saadoun Shakir, Tareq Aziz, Fadel Sulfeij al-Azzawi, Watban Ibrahim al-Hassan, Sabaawi Ibrahim al-Hassan, Ahmed Hussein, Mazban Khedr Hadi, Ali Hassan al-Majid, Saber al-Dori, Aziz Saleh al-Nawman, Abdelhamid Soliman, Saad Saleh Ahmed Sultan, Muhammad Khudeir al-Halboussi, Fadel Abbas al-Aamiri, Nu'man Ali al-Tikriti and Iyad Taha Shihab. Feyli Kurds are a group of people of Iranian stock living in Baghdad and Diala province,

around Khanaqin and Mandili. Feylis speak Feyli, a dialect of the Pahlawani. ***The roots of the Feylis go back to the Aryan immigrants of the first millennium BC, and more*** specifically, the Parthian/Pahlawi/Pahlawanid settlements of the 2nd century BD. They embraced Islam in the early stages of the Islamic conquest and colonization of Mesopotamia (Iraq) and Iran, though archeological evidence from the Ilam province in Iran indicates that a significant proportion of Feylis were Nestorian Christians until the 18th Century. When the Safavid dynasty (1507-1721) held sway over Persia, Feyli Kurds switched to the Shiite Jaafari doctrine under Persian influence.
In modern times the Feylis have been subject to state persecutions. They are considered as a stateless people, with both Iran and Iraq claiming they are citizens of the other country. In mid-1970s, Iraq expelled around 40,000 Shiite Feyli Kurds who had lived for generations near Baghdad and Khanaqin, alleging that they were Iranian nationals.

Iraqi unemployment rate dropped by 15% in 2008

The Iraqi unemployment rate dropped by 15 percent in 2008 compared to previous years, according to the Central Agency for Statistics and Information Technology. The survey covered 18,144 families from all over Iraq, including the Kurdistan region," according to a report released by the agency and received by Aswat al-Iraq news agency. The survey revealed a 26 percent unemployment rate among young people (15-14-year-olds) during the fourth quarter of 2008, compared with 31 percent in 2006, the report added.

Economic front

Turkish company to build housing compound in Karbala

A Turkish company has received an investment permit to build a housing compound in Karbala province at an estimated cost of $248 million U.S. dollars. "The compound will include 5,000 housing units," the media director of Karbala's Investment Commission, Raed al-Assly, told Aswat al-Iraq news agency. The company has presented its designs to the commission, which gave the go-ahead for the launch of the project, he noted. A memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed between the commission and the Turkish company in September 2008, the official added.

Finance Ministry finalizes fresh draft on customs tariff

The Iraqi Finance Ministry finalized on Monday a new draft law on the customs tariff to replace law 77/1955 currently in effect, according to a ministry press release. The new draft, which is meant to keep pace with global development in this sphere, should help protect the national productions, improve price competitiveness, yield financial revenues for Iraq, and curb the flow of bad products into the local markets," read the release as received by Aswat al-Iraq news agency."The draft law would also take into account Iraq's accession to international organizations," it added. The ministry however, did not say whether the draft was referred to the cabinet nor elaborated on the time it should be submitted to parliament.

Finance minister calls on Australian companies to invest in Iraq

The Iraqi minister of finance called on Australian companies to invest in Iraq, nothing that investment legislation in the country "guarantees cooperation for investment companies to build and rehabilitate Iraq," according to release issued by the Finance Ministry. "Minister Baqr Jabr al-Zubaidi received in Baghdad the Australian ambassador to Iraq," said the release "The two sides discussed their countries' mutual relations especially in the fields of electricity, power, constructing residential compounds, in addition to revamping water networks and roads," it added.

4 projects to push up production in Baghdad oil refinery

Oil Minister Hussein al-Shahrestani on Monday inaugurated four giant projects in Baghdad's al-Doura oil refinery at a cost of over $67 million U.S. dollars. "The projects have been completed in a record period of 18 months in order to meet the increasing local demands for oil derivatives," an official spokesperson for the ministry, Aasem Jihad, told Aswat al-Iraq news agency. The projects will increase the refinery's gas production from 2.5 million liter per day to 3 million, Jihad explained. A new refinery unit with a capacity of 70,000 barrel per day (bpd) will be installed within the current year, he added.

Iraq to increase oil exports to 2 million barrels a day in 2009

Iraq seeks to export 2 million barrels of oil a day in 2009, Oil Minister Hussain al-Shahristani said. Shahristani also predicted Iraq to be able to meet domestic needs of refined products by 2010 and even set aside "a good surplus" for exports. The minister made the remarks as he inaugurated new refining installations at the Dora Refinery, Iraq's oldest with a capacity of more than 100,000 barrels a day. Since the U.S. invasion of 2003, Iraq has been spending billions of dollars a year to cover its fuel import bill. Acts of sabotage and rickety infrastructure led to a substantial drop in refining capacity. He said Iraqi refineries should be capable of meeting domestic needs for kerosene and gas oil this year "due to improvements and additions made recently to the Dora refinery." **Domestic needs of gasoline** should be met in 2010, he added. Iraq's ***current oil exports average*** 1.5 to 1.8 million barrels daily. Domestic needs of crude oil are estimated at 700,000 barrels a day. With 2 million barrels expected to be earmarked for export, the country should be producing 2.7 million barrels a day in 2009 – a feat which some analysts see rather unfeasible.

Two new dams for Kirkuk

Two new dams have been inaugurated in the oil-rich city of Kirkuk to alleviate the city's thirst for drinking water and use the surplus for irrigation. Water Resources Minister Abdulatif Rasheed attended a celebration on the occasion and said he was pleased to have both dams completed in a very short time. Rasheed said his ministry was planning more irrigation projects in the province. The two dams, called Shireen and Balkana, can store up to 1.6 million cubic meters of water and irrigate extensive swathes of agricultural land.

Jordan

Political front

Lower House endorses 2009 anti-human trafficking law

The Lower House endorsed the 2009 anti-human trafficking law that seeks to prevent trade in workers. According to the law, a national committee will be established to create awareness in society on human trafficking and its dangers. Jordan is a signatory to the UN Trafficking Protocol and is working to ratify it, according to MP Mubarak Abu Yameen, who heads the House Legal Committee. ***The Protocol to Prevent,*** Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, supplementing the Convention Against Transnational Organised Crime, was adopted by the United Nations in Palermo, Italy, in 2000. Also 24 deputies signed a memorandum requesting House Speaker Abdul Hadi Majali to invite members of the Palestinian Legislative Council to Jordan in order to reach reconciliation.

House panel draws roadmap to sue Israel over Gaza war

The Lower House Legal Committee decided on a series of actions to be taken to sue Israeli leaders on the backdrop of the devastating attack on the Gaza Strip. At a meeting held after the House's evening session yesterday, the panel members debated options and set a scale of priorities, taking into consideration the time element and effectiveness of the approach, according to the committee chairperson, Mubarak Abu Yameen. According to international law experts, Israel, in principle, cannot be sued at the ICC because it is not a signatory to the Rome Statute on which the global tribunal was established. However, the motion can be filed with the court's prosecutor general directly. The move came in response to a memorandum signed by 37 MPs requesting the House to sue Israeli leaders as "war criminals who practised genocide" during the 22-day war on Gaza launched on December 27. The onslaught killed at least 1,300, injured more than 5,000 and destroyed thousands of houses.

Agricultural strategy launched

His Majesty King Abdullah said the status of farmers will improve in 2009 as the implementation of the nationwide Agricultural Strategy starts. The government, the private sector and the Jordanian Farmers Union are working hand-in-hand to realise the plan, he added. In October last year, the Monarch said that in 2009 focus will be placed on plans to improve and develop the agricultural sector and help farmers overcome the challenges facing them. King Abdullah said the government would soon be ready with answers to a number of questions raised by agricultural sector representatives who attended yesterday's meeting. Issues of concern include health insurance and social security coverage for farm workers and means to cope with the scarce rainfall this season, in addition to the mission and scope of work of a planned company that will handle the

marketing of agricultural produce. The King added that meetings will be held to follow up on the issues brought up at the meeting, especially after the government has taken the necessary time to study the steps it will take to address challenges faced by the agricultural sector. Addressing the agricultural sector's representatives, His Majesty said the meeting is meant as an opportunity to listen to their remarks regarding the challenges they face and look into means to help them.

Bashir stresses need for humanitarian aid, unity for Palestinians

Minister of Foreign Affairs Salah Bashir stressed on Sunday the need to coordinate international efforts to address the repercussions of the Israeli military offensive on the Gaza Strip. During his participation in a meeting of foreign ministers of the European Troika along with their counterparts from Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Palestinian National Authority in Brussels, Bashir underlined the need to meet the humanitarian needs of Palestinians. The minister emphasised the need to prioritise the humanitarian aspect of the conflict in order to address Palestinians' urgent medical and physical needs.Bashir also stressed the Kingdom's readiness to offer all its logistical capabilities to ensure assistance is delivered to reduce the suffering of Palestinians living in the besieged coastal strip. Highlighting the importance of a unified Palestinian government, Bashir referred to Jordan's support for the Egyptian diplomatic efforts in this regard.

Gov't to announce detailed plan on Iraqis

The government has started taking measures to facilitate the entry and residency of Iraqi citizens in the Kingdom, Prime Minister Nader Dahabi said. The new measures will be finalised and announced soon after wrapping up an evaluation process of previous measures taken in this regard, the premier said at a meeting with a delegation from the Iraqi Business Council and the Iraqi Businesspeople Society. The measures will include facilitating the entry of individuals and goods and the use of Aqaba Port for the flow of goods to and from Iraq. Dahabi added that the trade exchange between Jordan and Iraq doubled in 2008 compared to 2007, stressing that Jordan is looking forward to a larger trade volume between the two neighbours in 2009. He noted that the government committee he formed, chaired by Minister of Interior Eid Fayez and comprising representatives from other concerned bodies, has already started taking immediate steps in favour of Iraqi guests, in line with His Majesty King Abdullah's directives.

Lower House to review options for legal action against Israel

The Lower House is scheduled to convene today to review options for legal action against Israeli "war crimes". In addition, lawmakers will discuss the Jordan News Agency draft law and the 2008 livestock protection fund law. MPs will examine recommendations put forward by the Legal Committee regarding potential mechanisms to sue the Israeli leadership involved in the military offensive on the Gaza Strip. The committee prioritized four options**. One option is to join a** campaign spearheaded by the National Centre for Human Rights, in coordination with NGOs, to directly request the International Criminal Court's prosecutor general to open an investigation and build a

case against Israeli officials responsible for "war crimes and genocide in Gaza", committee chairperson Mubarak Abu Yameen told. The panel also recommended filing a lawsuit against Israeli leaders at a European national court such as in Spain, Britain or Belgium, which looks into cases against suspected war criminals**.** ***The third endorsed option*** is to request the government, through the House speakership, to call for a meeting of the UN General Assembly and summon UN chief Ban Ki-moon to provide testimony based on his observations while visiting the war-scarred Gaza last week. The Legal Committee also suggested Jordan's legislation to be amended to provide the Kingdom's courts with jurisdiction to hear war crimes and genocide cases.

House endorses livestock protection fund law

The Lower House on Wednesday endorsed the 2008 livestock protection fund law following a government pledge to allocate funds for the sector in 2009 and an announcement by Prime Minister Nader Dahabi that all procedures followed in drafting the legislation were in accordance with the Constitution. Before the law was put to vote yesterday, a number of deputies objected to the House Agriculture Committee's recommendation to cancel a tax introduced to the bill by the Chamber of Deputies. Earlier this month, lawmakers voted to enact new taxes to finance the proposed livestock protection fund despite government suggestions to find alternative funding sources. Stressing that the fund needed immediate support, MPs added a provision to the law that entailed imposing a one-fils tax on each minute of a mobile or landline phone call and one fils per kilowatt of electricity, but it was rejected by the Senate. The amendment was meant to support the livestock sector by facilitating farmers' access to low-interest loans.

House approves action to sue Israel

Lawmakers approved recommendations submitted by the House Legal Committee on several options to sue Israeli "war criminals", following the three-week devastating attack on Gaza that killed more than 1,300 people. But a Geneva-based expert said one of the tactics is irrelevant, while another is too weak to yield any fruit. Early in the week, the committee recommended potential mechanisms to sue the Israeli leadership involved in the military offensive in the Gaza Strip. One option is to join a campaign spearheaded by the National Centre for Human Rights in coordination with NGOs, to send a "letter of notification and referral" to the International Criminal Court (ICC) prosecutor general to open an investigation and build a case against Israeli officials responsible for "war crimes and genocide in Gaza". However, according to Executive Director of Geneva Institute for Human Rights Nazar Abdul Qader, the NGOs' power is relatively insignificant when it comes to cases filed with the ICC through the "letter of notification and referral" addressed to the tribunal's prosecutor general. It would be a more solid case if a state initiates this motion.

Geostrategic front

Social front

Islamists reject Saudi cleric's remarks against boycott

The Islamist movement in Jordan rejected remarks by the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia Abdul Aziz Al Sheikh, in which he criticised the boycott campaign waged by activists in response to Israel's military offensive in Gaza. "Fighting the enemy is a religious duty. The economic aspect is part of this fight," overall leader of the ***Muslim Brotherhood*** movement, Hamam Said, said in a statement published on the group's website. The Saudi grand mufti's remarks, which were published in the London-based Al Hayat on Saturday, provoked criticism from activists in Jordan and abroad. In the lecture, the Saudi cleric played down the significance of the boycott and called for ending this practice. The grand mufti added that the boycott campaign will only "harm people" in the region. Activists organised a series of events to alert citizens about the significance of this boycott, with the Islamist movement and professional associations warning local companies that deal with Israel to stop all commercial activities with the Jewish state. The move is part of a regional effort by activists in protest against what they regard as Washington's pro-Israeli policies during the three-week onslaught.

Activists plan to hold symbolic trial for Israel's 'war crimes'

Women's rights activists said they are planning to hold a symbolic trial in Amman next month for Israel's "war crimes" against the Gaza Strip. Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW) Legal Coordinator Raedah Freahat said some 27 women's groups are currently preparing a legal petition that they will present to the "peoples' international criminal court". More than 1,300 people were killed in the Israeli offensive, which began in late December. The attacks left over 5,000 Palestinians injured, many with permanent disabilities. The idea behind the symbolic trial, according to Freahat, is to invite influential international figures, veteran judges and Nobel peace prize winners to participate. The group also plans to compile all the news articles that were written on the atrocities and crimes committed against the Palestinian people, especially women, to submit as evidence during the trial. The press clippings file will also include all the efforts that were exerted by the women's groups in Jordan to help Gazans. Freahat also told that efforts are ongoing by women's groups to collect donations and goods to send to the coastal enclave. JNCW Media Coordinator Rana Shawar said the activity is in accordance with UN Resolution 1325 which addresses the safety and security of women in times of war and conflict.

Authorities look to identify factors behind unemployment

In order to better address unemployment at the local level, aid and labour authorities have started a coordinated campaign to identify challenges facing jobless citizens in different communities across the country. According to a senior official at the National Aid Fund (NAF), the government's leading welfare agency, the NAF has been conducting targeted

visits of beneficiaries alongside the Ministry of Labour since the beginning of the year to better assess factors behind unemployment. The NAF official said the visits, which will include both urban and rural areas, have already been conducted in the northern Jordan Valley and Shobak as well as in neighbourhoods across the capital. Kafaween said dialogue with local community members has already helped shed light on problems facing employable young men and women, as well as factors behind their refusal or reluctance to accept certain jobs. The campaign also aims to identify the type of industries or work opportunities needed in specific regions and prepare future projects that could be established to help meet communities' employment needs, according to Kafaween. Meanwhile, 60 individuals who were actively seeking jobs were referred this month to the Vocational Training Corporation for potential training.

New hotline to offer counselling for women

Women in need of legal consultation will soon be able to avail the services of a new toll-free hotline to be launched by a women's group next month. Starting February 11, women seeking guidance on various issues can dial 080022955. The line is operated by the Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW) and part of the Women's Complaint Office, a project supported by Freedom House. She told The Jordan Times that the focus of the complaint office is "mainly on gender discrimination in the work field". She noted that women calling the hotline for other problems will be offered guidance and if their case does not fall within the jurisdiction of the complaint office they will be guided to other NGOs to seek assistance.The aim of the project is to connect governmental and nongovernmental efforts in Amman to better serve women, Shalabi said, adding that the second phase of the project will include other governorates in the Kingdom. The office will also be responsible for collecting national data on violence against women and issuing an annual report with its findings, she noted. The goal is to formulate a national strategy that would determine what actions should be taken to eliminate violence against women, according to Shalabi.

Prince Hassan stresses importance of enhancing mental health services

HRH Prince Hassan, chairman of the Higher Council for Science and Technology (HCST), highlighted the importance of prioritizing mental health and ensuring the rights of patients. During the inauguration of a workshop to discuss the recommendations of a national team on the situation of mental health services in the Kingdom, Prince Hassan called for national efforts to improve the mental health sector and upgrade services. The recommendations included a five-year plan to upgrade the mental health sector by making amendments to current policies and regulations as well as establishing an independent commission to advocate for the rights of people with mental disabilities. During the event, organised by HCST, recommendations also included launching community-awareness campaigns and improving the efficiency of workers in the sector.

Ombudsman Bureau to embark on mission

Residents who believe they are harmed by a practice, a decision or any measure by any of the Kingdom's public administrations can file a petition as of Sunday with Ombudsman Bureau, where officials will process the claim and provide counselling. The bureau's president, Salem Khazaaleh, said at a press conference Tuesday that people can, as a start, fill in a form available at the Kingdom's post offices at no charge as of February1, adding that once complaints are received by the bureau, it will immediately take action as stipulated in the law governing the work of the independent agency. The bureau can play the role of a mediator between those who submit the complaints and the concerned agency, the official said, adding that the bureau's staff will be helping people develop their complaints on proper legal grounds and provide them with counselling and legal advice, he said. The office will particularly deal with issues that do not fall under the jurisdiction of courts and those not governed by specific pieces of legislation. The agency will also make sure that complaints are not shelved for a long time and work to get answers as swiftly as possible, the official told reporters.

Ministry 'firm on anti-smoking law enforcement'

The Ministry of Health has banned the import of the "electronic cigarette", which manufacturers claim is an effective means to help quit smoking. The ministry cited a "higher percentage of nicotine", used in the device, following suit of the World Health Organisation (WHO), which has previously warned against its use. In a statement Health Minister Salah Mawajdeh said the ministry has turned down an application by a local company to import the item. However, according to the WHO website, there is "no scientific evidence whatsoever that would confirm that the electronic cigarette is a safe and effective smoking cessation device". The WHO was "greatly concerned" that some manufacturers had used the WHO name or logo on their packages or websites, falsely implying endorsement. In a related development, the ministry has sent a circular to the Kingdom's public institutions, notifying them of the Public Health Law that prohibits smoking in public areas, Director of the Primary Healthcare Directorate Adel Bilbeisi told. According to Bilbeisi, the ministry will enforce the law by imposing a JD15-20 fine on those caught smoking in public facilities or a penalty of imprisonment ranging from one week to one month.

Jordanian-Kazakh committee to convene in Amman

The joint Jordanian-Kazakh inter-governmental committee will convene in Amman with the aim of signing several major agreements in different fields, according to the Kazakhstan's ambassador to the Kingdom. Ambassador Bulat Sarsenbayev told The Jordan Times that the Kazakh delegation will include 10 government officials headed by Agriculture Minister Kurishbayev Akhylbek. This is the committee's third meeting and it is expected to improve cooperation in the fields of agriculture, tourism, investment, education and science, health, customs and energy. Noting that the trade volume between the two countries has risen from $13.5 million in 2007 to $39.1 million at the end of last September, the envoy described the amount as "promising" for more trade cooperation. Sarsenbayev stressed that the meetings seek also to encourage investment projects between both countries. Sarsenbayev indicated that tourism between the two countries is

growing, particularly from Kazakhstan to the Kingdom. Jordan has facilitated visa issuance to Kazakh citizens as they can obtain visas at the airport, a measure described by the envoy as "a good step".

Economic front

IFC commits largest ever investment programme in Jordan - Attiga

The international credit crunch may delay the implementation of megaprojects in Jordan, said the representative of the International Finance Corporation (IFC) in Jordan. IFC's Ahmed Attiga, country manager, Jordan & Iraq, told a press conference on Sunday that major consortiums will not scrap their plans to do business in the Kingdom, but due to difficulties in arranging their financial resources, the process could face postponement. Attiga did not mention any specific task as he was answering questions about the general impact of the world financial crisis on the consortiums which actually bid or had expressed interest in undertaking large projects in the Kingdom. He spoke at large about the IFC investments in Jordan, indicating that "IFC committed its largest ever investment programme in Jordan, which included seven projects, with a total committed portfolio of around $300 million." Within the advisory services, three projects are included:

1) Inspection reform to improve the business climate in Jordan due to lack of clarity of inspection requirements, lack of qualified inspectors, indiscriminate system with regard to risk, ineffective remedies, conflicting or duplicating requirements and because the criteria for inspection decisions are vague and leave room for discretion. Over a period of two years, the project will support the government in implementing a comprehensive licencing and inspection reform programme. This is expected to simplify and streamline the inspection processes in selected ministries and reduce the time and cost burden that inspections place on businesses.

2) Credit bureau to help Jordan draft and adopt new legislation that will regulate the sharing of credit information. IFC will also help raise awareness among the private and public sectors about the benefits of credit reporting. The long-term goals of the credit bureau programme are to increase the efficiency of financial institutions, to support the growth of smaller businesses and to mitigate lending risks.

3) Leasing to help a number of companies build their capacities.

EU, ministry encourage local development solutions

A water pipeline project proposed by citizens in the Municipality of Hallabat is one of dozens of initiatives the European Union and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs are looking to promote in order to combat unemployment. The project is a priority as around 50 per cent of the town's 7,000 residents used to work in the agricultural sector but now face unemployment due to water scarcity, Hallabat resident Mufleh Othman said during a tour by an EU delegation to the municipality. Patrick Renauld, head of the European Commission Delegation in Amman, told The Jordan Times that the proposed initiative is

the type the EU is looking to fund under the potential renewal of its 30 million euro four-year programme to promote initiatives developed by municipalities that lead to job creation, which expired last year. Minister of Municipal Affairs Shihadeh Abu Hdeib, who joined the delegation's tour in Al Hashemiyah, pointed out that the ministry has drawn up a four-year strategy to develop municipalities' role from service providers to financially independent entities.

Dahabi highlights Arab efforts to confront global economic crisis

Prime Minister Nader Dahabi on Monday highlighted joint Arab efforts to address the consequences of the global financial crisis on the Arab labour force. He made the remarks during a meeting with president of the Arab Labour Organisation Ahmad Lokman, who briefed the premier on decisions taken by the Arab economic and social forum held prior to the Kuwait Economic Summit. During the meeting, attended by Labour Minister Bassem Salem, they discussed issues related to unemployment and poverty. Lokman underscored the importance of an upcoming conference on the Arab labour market, slated to take place in Amman in April.

Jordan Securities Commission to further strengthen capital market's regulations

The Jordan Securities Commission (JSC) will implement a two-year programme to further develop and strengthen capital market's regulations in the Kingdom and to fine-tune the trading products and practices in the market. Under a memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed Monday between the JSC, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Financial Services Volunteer Corps (FSVC), the programme is designed to introduce risk-based supervision of brokers operating at the Amman Stock Exchange. According to a statement received by The Jordan Times, the programme seeks to advice on monitoring and reducing market volatility and enhancing member firms' capital adequacy. The programme will also assist in drafting a legislation related to mergers and acquisitions as well as upgrading provisions for investor protection fund besides broadening the investor base, creating new investment opportunities, developing new trading practices and reviewing the IT infrastructure of the capital market institutions.

Jordanian-Qatari Trade Committee examines means to boost trade exchange, cooperation

The Joint Jordanian-Qatari Trade Committee discussed means to increase trade exchange and cooperation between the two countries. The two sides stressed the importance of setting plans to increase investments, Industry and Trade Secretary General Montaser Oqlah said. He said the trade volume between Jordan and Qatar stood at $85 million last year. The two-day meetings will look into signing agreements in the fields of investment promotion, agriculture, labour and customs cooperation among others.

Jordan, Qatar finalise $2b fund deal

Jordan and Qatar agreed on Wednesday to create a $2 billion Qatari investment fund in Jordan. Following meetings of the 2nd session of the Joint Jordanian-Qatari Economic Committee yesterday, Minister of Industry and Trade Amer Hadidi said Qatar is looking forward to increasing the country's private sector's investments in Jordan and benefit from opportunities and incentives provided by the business environment in the Kingdom. In November, Jordan and Qatar looked into details to create an agreed-upon joint investment fund, deemed of great significance to enhance investment cooperation between the two countries. ***The fund entails joint projects*** between the public and private sectors in both countries in the fields of food industries, mining, health, education, energy, agriculture, IT, tourism, infrastructure and financial services. At the meeting, Dahabi and the Qatari official discussed the joint investment fund which was approved during Dahabi's visit to Doha in November. Dahabi said Jordan welcomes Qatari investments in the fields of alternative and nuclear energy as well as gas exploration. Following the joint committee's meeting, Hadidi said the political will shown by the two countries should be translated into increased economic and trade cooperation. Hadidi stressed that the investment opportunities available in Jordan and its business-friendly environment constitute a strong drive to boost Qatari investments in the Kingdom through using the financial surplus available currently in this Arab Gulf state.

Jordanian field hospital opens its doors to Gazan patients

The Jordanian field military hospital in Tal Al Hawa started operations, receiving a total of 370 patients. Patients suffering from "serious" ailments were admitted to the makeshift hospital, dubbed "Gaza 1", and received medical treatment Dispatched to Gaza earlier this week upon His Majesty King Abdullah's directives, the field hospital, along with two ambulances donated by the Monarch, includes a team of specialists in fields in demand in Gaza such as neurosurgery, cardiology, general surgery, urology, orthopaedics, plastic surgery, paediatric surgery, face and jaw surgery among others. With its current supplies, the 44-bed hospital can run for six weeks at maximum capacity with a 180-strong team of doctors and other medical cadre working around-the-clock to meet the urgent needs of Gazans who have suffered from an Israeli military offensive that left over 1,300 dead and thousands injured.

Environmentalists call for investigation into Israel's use of white phosphorus

Environmentalists urged the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to investigate Israel's use of internationally banned white phosphorus munitions during its 22 days of attacks on Gaza. In addition to leaving over 1,300 Palestinians dead, the Israeli military offensive on the Gaza Strip and its use of chemical weapons destroyed the area's infrastructure and environmental resources including water and agriculture, the Jordan Environment Action Coordination Commission said in a statement "We call upon the United Nations and the UNEP to carry out an immediate assessment of effects resulting from the use of such chemical weapons and explosives, in addition to the future impact on the environment and health," added the commission, an umbrella organisation for the Kingdom's environmental societies. As part of a comprehensive "needs assessment" of damages resulting from the Gaza attacks, the UNEP, the UN Mines Action Service and

other organisations are currently taking soil and water samples from the coastal enclave to test for pollution, according to UN sources in Jerusalem. The testing is aimed at assessing overall pollution and environmental damage caused by the conflict, not specifically for white phosphorus.

Syria

Economic front

President al-Assad to Leaders of Palestinian Factions: It is Important to Invest Politically the Victory of the Palestinian People to Consolidate Rights, Including the Right of Return

President Bashar al-Assad discussed with leaders of the Palestinian factions in Damascus the developments in Palestine following the victory of the Palestinian people and the resistance in Gaza Strip in the face of the brutal Israeli aggression, affirming the need for continuing work to lift the siege and open all crossing points permanently. President al-Assad praised the Palestinian people's resistance, the cooperation among resistance factions during the aggression, and the people of Gaza's support for the resistance, all of which led to achieving victory and foiling the plans and goals of Israel. He called for investing politically in this victory to consolidate the Palestinian rights, including the right of return. In turn, leaders of the Palestinian factions and groups thanked Syria's leadership and people for the support they continue to provide to the Palestinian people and the resistance, affirming that Syria is a partner in this victory. They also affirmed their determination to continue with the resistance until they achieve victory and establish the Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. President al-Assad also affirmed that the failure of Israel to achieve its goals in Gaza despite using the deadliest weapons proves that the Palestinian people are committed to their rights and to their land, and that it also shows their deep faith in their inevitable victory over occupation and aggression.

Al-Hussein, Marini Discuss Economic and Financial Cooperation between Syria and France

Minister of Finance Dr. Mohammad al-Hussein discussed with envoy of the French President, member of the French Senate and Head of the French-Syrian Parliamentary Friendship Association Philippe Marini the future of economic and financial bilateral cooperation between Syria and France. Minister al-Hussein affirmed Syria's readiness and intent for establishing the best cooperation relations with France. He also welcomed the French suggestion for cooperation in various economic fields, pointing out to Syria's early and constructive cooperation with French delegations in the financial sector. In turn, Marini commended the achievements and progress in Syria regarding the legislations and procedures for reforming the

financial and economic sector, expressing the French side's readiness to provide ideas and suggestions for cooperating with the Syrian government to accomplish the intended reforms.

Talks dealt with cooperation between Syria and France in the field of technical support, training, and investing in joint projects within the framework of the Union for the Mediterranean projects.

Al-Moallem meets Qaddoumi, says resistance victory defeated Israeli plots

Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem underlined that the struggle and victory of resistance had defeated Israeli plots in achieving the goals of it aggression on Gaza, calling for lifting siege and opening crossing points to allow the entering of human relief materials into the Strip. The Minister discussed with Chairman of the Political Department at the Palestinian Liberation Organization Farouk al-Qaddoumi the latest developments in Palestine following the Israeli brutal aggression on the Strip and its impacts and disastrous results on the Palestinians. In a statement, Mr. Qaddoumi thanked Syria for its support to the Palestinian resistance, stressing continuation of this resistance till liberating the occupied Arab lands. "Lifting the unfair siege imposed by Israel on Gaza, opening crossing points and providing the Palestinians with the basic need are of priorities we should work for," Qaddoumi added.

Minister of Industry Discusses Possibility of Establishing Joint Companies with CEO of Syrian-Qatari Holding Company

Minister of Industry Dr. Fouad Issa al-Joni reviewed on Wednesday with CEO of Syrian-Qatari Holding Company Hassan Mukayed a number of projects suggested by the Ministry of Industry for establishing joint companies with the private or public sectors. Minister al-Joni pointed out that the Ministry is looking for a partner to establish a project for producing powdered milk and regular milk in Hama governorate, in addition to projects for producing lint, drugs for the treatment of cancer and diabetes, tires, fertilizers, phosphoric acid, petrochemicals, heaters and busses. Other projects suggested by the Minister for the private sector include milling, production of animal feed, liquid gas, bricks, liquid chlorine, plastics, cars, solar-powered street lights and the assembly and manufacturing of mobile phones. Minister al-Joni underlined his Ministry's interest in partnering with Syrian-Qatari Holding Company, pointing out that economic feasibility studies for many of these projects require updating to accommodate the recent increase in material costs and services. For his part, Moukayed affirmed his company's desire to participate in significant and strategic projects, adding that these projects will be studied in order to select a number of them to be carried out.

President al-Assad Awards Algerian Freedom Fighter Jamila Bouhired the Syrian Order of Merit of Excellent Degree

Freedom fighter Jamila Bouhired expressed her gratitude to President Bashar al-Assad for awarding her the Syrian Order of Merit of Excellent Degree in recognition of her honorable participation in the struggle for Algeria's independence during the French occupation and her current stances in support of resistance as means for restoring rights and restoring the occupied Arab lands. During her visit to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, she pointed out that Syria is a pioneer of revolution and liberation movements, describing it as "the land of resistance, cradle of revolution, the heart of Arabism that beats with love for all Arabs." Bouhired also visited the Martyrs' Daughters School, where the students welcomed her with artistic performances and patriotic songs.

Geo strategic front

Syrian-Iraqi Memo of Understanding on Communications

The Syrian Ministry of Communication and Technology and the Iraqi Ministry of Communication signed on Monday a memo of understanding for cooperation in the fields of communication, information technology and mail. The Memo aims to develop economic and social relations in the fields of communication, information technology and mail. It also stipulates for exchanging scientific and technical information and research programs, in addition to organizing training programs, seminars, mutual visits and consultations. It also calls for exchanging information regarding international legislations related to communication, information technology and mail, in addition to cooperation in relevant fields, including improving the performance of the private sector in communication and information technology.

Al-Shara, al-Abrash Discuss Regional Situation, Bilateral Relations with Finnish Delegation

Vice President Farouk al-Shara discussed with a Finnish parliamentary delegation headed by Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee at the Parliament of Finland Pertti Salolainen the situation in the Middle East, particularly the brutal Israeli aggression on the Palestinian people in Gaza and its destructive results on the peace process. Mr. al-Shara underlined the role of European MPs in denouncing the Israeli aggression on Gaza and working to lift the siege, open crossing points and provide the basic needs of the Palestinian people. For his part, Mr. Salolainen expressed appreciation of Syria's constructive regional role, affirming that his country's MPs support Palestinian national unity. The Finnish delegation also discussed with Speaker of the People's Assembly Dr. Mahmoud al-Abrash the bilateral parliamentary relations and means for developing and bolstering them. Talks also discussed the regional developments and the situation in Palestine, particularly the situation in Gaza Strip in light of the ongoing Israeli criminal practices against the Palestinian people. Dr. al-Abrash stressed the importance of exchanging parliamentary visits between Syria and Finland, reiterating Syria's stances regarding just and comprehensive peace and Syria's right to restore the occupied Syrian Golan. He underlined the importance of cooperation between Syria and the European Union due to its active role in the region's stability and development, adding that the economic reform process

in Syria has made significant progress. In turn, ***Salolainen stressed that the delegation's visit aims to learn about Syria and find means to expand the bilateral*** relations between the two countries.

Adi Discusses Bilateral Relations with Cuban Communist Party Delegation

Member of the Regional Leadership of al-Baath Arab Socialist Party and Head of

the Regional Workers and Peasants Office Osama Adi discussed on Tuesday with Deputy Director of the International Relations Department at the Cuban Communist Party's Central Committee Oscar Martinez Cordoves cooperation relations between the two Parties and means for bolstering them. Talks during the meeting stressed the importance of communication and uniting efforts to face the crises facing developing countries and confronting attempts of hegemony, in addition to discussing regional developments and the problems caused by Israel, affirming that the Israel's aggression on Gaza constitutes a genocide and an attempt to break the will of the Palestinian people after it failed due to the resilience of the resistance and the public support for it. Mr. Adi affirmed that Syria supports the national resistance forces in the region and works to strengthen this course in the Arab nation, adding that Syria expressed desire for peace but Israel continues to adopt war and murder to impose its existence. He also praised the stances of Cuba and the Communist Party of Cuba in support of Arab causes For his part, Cordoves reiterated Cuba's stances in support of the Arab just causes, denouncing the Israeli aggression on Gaza Strip and Israel's war crimes and massacres against innocent civilians. He affirmed that Cuba is making efforts to defend the Palestinian and Arab causes from its position as the leader of the Non-Aligned Movement.

Al-Moallem, Marini Discuss Repercussions of Israeli Aggression on Gaza Strip

Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem discussed on Tuesday with envoy of the French President, Member of the French Senate and Head of the French-Syrian Parliamentary Friendship Association Philippe Marini the bilateral relations between the two countries and means for bolstering them, stressing the importance of continuing communication on various levels. Talks also discussed the repercussions of the Israeli siege on Gaza Strip and its disastrous consequences on the Palestinian people, in addition to discussing suitable means for rebuilding Gaza. Minister al-Moallem affirmed the need for working to lift the siege imposed on Gaza Strip and open all crossing points, including Rafah, to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid to the Strip. For his part, Marini pointed out to Syria's pivotal role which constitutes an element that helps achieve balance in the region.

Marini: My Visit to Damascus Aims to follow up on Issues Raised during Presidents al-Assad-Sarkozy Meetings

The French Presidential Envoy, Senator and Head of the French-Syrian Friendship Association Philippe Marini stressed importance of the latest achievements of the Syrian-French relations through the direct coordination between Presidents Bashar al-Assad and Nicolas Sarkozy and the continuous contacts between their countries on all levels. Mr. Marini, speaking at a news conference at the French Embassy in Damascus, said his visit to Damascus is part of continuing missions of previous visits to Syria since 2000, and to follow up on issues already discussed between Presidents al-Assad and Sarkozy last summer. Mr. Marini pointed out to the importance of the relations linking between Syria and France in various cultural, educational, university, judicial and administrative fields, stressing that this diversity in the relations will help boost up the ties between the two countries in light of France's strong knowledge of the region. He expressed appreciation of the great role played by President Bashar al-Assad to develop and advance Syria. He added that "I had a lengthy meeting with President al-Assad…and I would like to thank him for his hospitality and open mind." The French Presidential Envoy praised the Syrian-French joint efforts which led to getting Lebanon out of its crisis, expressing the hope that these efforts will continue to find solutions for the pending problems in the region.

As for the Israeli aggression on Gaza, Mr. Marini said "we are moved very much by the ugly tragedy which happened in Gaza which raises daily reactions for the French public opinion." He stressed necessity of establishing a viable Palestinian state, pointing out to the right of the Palestinian people to exercise their national rights.

Aleppo governor underlines importance of Syrian-Turkish Cooperation

Governor of Aleppo Tamer al-Hijja underlined that the Syrian-Turkish regional cooperation program, launched since 2006, between Aleppo and Turkish states of Kilis and Gaziantep is considered as one of the important fruits of cooperation between the two countries. "Projects adopted by the two countries stress joint serious desire to intensify efforts to deepen and develop bilateral relations between the two friendly countries," the Governor, who returned back from a visit to Gaziantep where he signed a protocol to execute the Children's Traffic Education Park, said. He added that the projects which are being executed in both countries form a basic factor to develop infrastructure and boost bilateral relations in the interest of both neighboring countries.

President al-Assad Receives al-Mur, reiterates Syria's readiness to help Lebanon

President Bashar al-Assad on Wednesday reiterated Syria's readiness to help Lebanon realize security and stability in the country and boost its strength. The President received Lebanese Defense Minister Elias al-Mur.Talks during the meeting dealt with cooperation between the Syrian and Lebanese armies as well as means of enhancing it in all fields.

Syrian Minister of Defense Hasan Turkmani held official talks with his Lebanese counterpart and the accompanying delegation in the presence of the Army's chief of staff Ali Habib and a number of Syrian senior officers in addition to the Chairman of the Syrian-Lebanese Higher Council Nasri

Khouri. The talks dealt with different aspects of cooperation and the mutual coordination between the two armies.

Alliance of Palestinian Factions: No Calm down before Opening all Crossing Points, Lifting Siege on Gaza

The Alliance of the Palestinian Factions and the Supreme Follow-up Committee of the National Palestinian Conference said they reject signing a calm down agreement before the opening of all the crossing points, lifting the siege on Gaza Strip and allowing food and medicine aid into the besieged Strip. The Secretary Generals of these Factions and the Committee stressed during their central meeting the rejection of any security arrangements that target the Palestinian people's rights and their courageous resistance and commitment to the option of resistance.They also stressed keenness on the Palestinian national unity, the national dialogue and reconciliation under Arab and Islamic mediation based on commitment to the firm principles and the program of the resistance as well as stopping security coordination with the Israeli enemy and setting free the Palestinian prisoners of resistance. The participants reiterated rejection to use the rebuilding process and national reconciliation for political blackmailing, calling on the Arab, Islamic and friendly countries to rally around the resistance and continue with the public activities in support of the resistance and the Palestinian people's legitimate rights.

They also announced the start of work for the establishment of a Palestinian united front to serve as a national term reference for the resistance parties so that the struggle of march will continue to bring about the objectives of liberation and return, adding that mechanism has been outlined for holding conferences to specify proper forms for this term of reference and enhancing the relations with the Arab, Islamic and friendly parties to confront the Israeli aggression.

Lebanon

Political front

Hamas: Smuggling of arms into Gaza will continue

Hamas movement representative in Lebanon Osama Hamdan said during his address to a rally at the UNESCO headquarters in Beirut on Sunday that the movement would continue smuggling arms into Gaza and the West Bank. Hamdan said: "We never failed to enter arms into Gaza during the high intensity of the war as the shelling was going on." He added: "Those that believe that a number of aircraft carriers could monitor the sea and that satellites in space could monitor underground tunnels and prevent arms from entering into Gaza are delusional." He explained that smuggling arms into Gaza was

never a 'walk in the park' but rather a tough journey paid for in blood, sweat and tears. "However despite all this, arms will continue to flow as usual," Hamdan said."Things might get tougher. However, we are ready to continue so that the resistance would continue," he said.

Elections 2009: Problems delay formation of electoral lists

A parliamentary minority bloc member admits that the campaign launched by some parties to urge President Michel Suleiman to attend the Doha summit was not improvised. He affirms that the campaign, in which many participated except for the Amal movement, was well organized adding that some wanted to "pull their ministers out of government in case Suleiman insisted on not going to Qatar." The minority official who spoke on condition of anonymity to the Pan-Arab daily al-Hayat on Monday, did not find a reason for the president's reservations over the suspension of the Arab peace initiative, as long as Saudi Arabia was quick to declare that the initiative "won't remain on the table forever." He defended the campaign made by some members of the parliamentary minority against the president, who is thought to Shepherd the emergence of a centrist or an independent parliamentary bloc that meets halfway with both March 8 and 14 Forces. Although the official did not wish to answer the question of why the parliamentary minority is against the president on this point, he was incapable of hiding the concerns of the head of "Change and Reform" parliamentary bloc leader MP Michel Aoun, who fears that independent candidates would eat away from his popularity especially at Mount Lebanon. Some of the "independents" were previous allies of Aoun in the 2005 elections.

Lebanon dialogue talks adjourned till March 2

Rival political leaders in Lebanon adjourned for more than a month negotiations on a national defense strategy at the heart of which lies the thorny issue of Hezbollah's weapons. A statement from the presidency said a team of experts will be formed to examine proposals on a defense strategy, and that another round of talks will be held on March 2 at the Baabda presidential place. It added that participants agreed to work on the implementation of previous agreements concerning the issue of Palestinian weapons outside the country's 12 refugee camps which house an estimated 400,000 people. The camps are policed by the Palestinians themselves, but outside the camps weapons are also held by the pro-Syrian Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command and by Fatah Intifada. Pressure has been mounting in Lebanon to tackle the issue of Palestinian weapons outside the camps after rockets were fired from the south into northern Israel during the Jewish state's 22-day onslaught on the Gaza Strip. Fourteen leaders from the main parliamentary blocs took part in the talks chaired by President Michel Suleiman. A major stumbling block in agreeing a common defense strategy has been the Shiite Hezbollah group's arsenal.

March 14: Yes for a big gathering on Feb 14, No for scare tactics

March 14 Forces reiterated its call to the Lebanese to participate at the popular gathering next February 14 at Martyr's Square in downtown Beirut to commemorate the fourth anniversary for the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. The parliamentary majority bloc also rejected "scare tactics on the eve of the parliamentary elections next June 7." March 14 General-Secretariat issued a statement following its meeting on Wednesday, emphasizing heavy participation on February 14 would be exceptional this year in defense of the goals for which Cedar Revolution members died for. The statement rejected the burning of vehicles in the south, shooting incidents at the Bekka and Beirut and the attempt to kill Harak Okian at the Burj-Hamoud region. Describing such events as "an attempt for creating fear and confusion among citizens." The statement also rejected the imposition of any new taxes and fees for any reason, based on the belief that the Lebanese cannot bear any new taxes

Suleiman Urges Cabinet to Handle Palestinian Bases

President Michel Suleiman urged the cabinet to follow up implementation of earlier decisions calling for disbanding Palestinian bases outside refugee camps. Suleiman made the call during a cabinet meeting at the Baabda Palace which tackled the state budget for fiscal 2009. Industry Minister Ghazi Zoaiter said Suleiman urged the cabinet to follow up implementation of decisions adopted by the national dialogue in the year 2006, especially "the topic of Palestinian weapons outside refugee camps." The term, in Lebanese political parlance, refers to military bases manned by pro-Syrian factions in the eastern Bekaa Valley and Beirut's southern suburb of Naameh.

Baroud: Cabinet to Address Prison Issue in Special Session

Interior Minister Ziad Baroud said the Cabinet will hold a special session to address the pressing issue of prison reforms. The daily An Nahar on Wednesday said Baroud submitted a written report to the Cabinet during its Tuesday meeting that included "documents, figures and practical suggestions." Baroud told An Nahar that there is an urgent need to set up a specialized Department of Prisons to be attached to the Ministry of Justice. He said the other part of his report covered the budget needed for parliamentary elections set for June 7. Baroud said the proposed LL 30 billion budget for the election process had been reduced to LL 22 billion, thanks to donations received by the ministry. He did not say where the donations came from, but uncovered that the contributions had so far reached $10 million.

Budget Crisis Threatens Government

Unless political leaders succeed in their efforts to defuse the row between Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri and Premier Fouad Saniora over local council appropriations to fund the reconstruction of south Lebanon, a special session on the budget is threatened.

The government uses the Council of the South, a body long in the hands of Berri's Amal Movement, as the main channel to distribute reconstruction funds in the south. Citing a well-informed political source Al Liwaa said that unless Jumblat succeeds in his efforts, a fifth Cabinet session scheduled for Friday is likely to be threatened. Meanwhile, well-informed sources told An Nahar newspaper that no progress had been made in efforts to defuse the budget crisis with Berri, backed by Hizbullah, insisting on an LL 60 billion increase for the Council and Saniora maintaining his position of rejecting any raise.

Haaretz: Vessel Intercepted by U.S. Was Likely Carrying Arms to Hizbullah
The captain of a ship that the U.S. Navy recently intercepted and searched has said his vessel is now en route to Syria. The boat was initially believed to be carrying arms destined for Hamas, though sources say the weapons will likely be delivered to Hizbullah, Adm. Michael Mullen, the chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the ship intercepted in the Red Sea was determined to have been destined for Syria, a leading supplier of Hamas and Hizbullah. Mullen said, however, that the U.S. could not legally hold the Cypriot-flagged ship. Officials also said the arms could not be shown to violate U.N. weapons sanctions against Iran. Israeli daily Haaretz quoted U.S. sources as saying that the job of monitoring the ship became Israel's the moment it reached Mediterranean waters. One source, according to Haaretz, holds that the weapons on board are apparently Katyusha rockets.

Geo strategic front

Khoury approved as Lebanon's first ambassador to Damascus

Lebanese Foreign Minister Fawzi Salloukh announced Tuesday that Syria has approved the nomination of Michel Khoury as the first Lebanese ambassador to Damascus,

"I have received a letter from Syria's interim charge d'affaires in Beirut indicating that Syrian authorities have agreed to Khoury's nomination as Lebanese ambassador to Syria," Salloukh told reporters It is not clear why Syria did not use the appropriate channels to relay its approval of Khoury . According to Lebanese political observers Syrian Foreign Minster Walid Mouallem should have contacted directly his counterpart Salloukh to inform him of Syria's decision on about this matter. Khoury was nominated last month by the cabinet , but his name was not officially announced then, in accordance to diplomatic norms. The name of the Syria ambassador to Lebanon was not officially revealed yet. But early this year the name of Colette Khoury was mentioned by Lebanese Central News Agency Al-Markazia as Syria's first ever ambassador to Lebanon

Lebanon's defense minister in Syria for security talks

Lebanese Defense Minister Elias Murr held talks Wednesday in Damascus with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on ways of boosting security coordination between the two countries**.** Murr's visit to Damascus was scheduled in order to follow up issues agreed upon by Lebanese President Michel Suleiman and his Syrian counterpart last

August, which are related to security cooperation on the borders, and preventing borders smuggling in accordance to UN resolution 1701. The visit comes one day after Syria informed Lebanon that it has approved the nomination of Michel Khoury as Lebanon's first ambassador to Damascus. Relations between the two neighbors have often been tense since Syria was forced to withdraw its troops in 2005 after maintaining a near 30-year military presence in Lebanon, which accused Syria of meddling in Lebanese affairs and of being behind a string of deadly assassinations of public figures since 2005, including former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

Egypt attacks Iran and its allies Hamas and Hezbollah

Egypt aired its grievances against Iran, the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas and the Lebanon's Shi'ite group Hezbollah, saying they worked together in the fighting over Gaza to provoke conflict in the Middle East. "(They tried) to turn the region to confrontation in the interest of Iran, which is trying to use its cards to escape Western pressure ... on the nuclear file," Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit said in an interview with Orbit satellite channel broadcast Wednesday. Aboul Gheit also said that Egypt undermined Qatar's attempts to arrange a formal Arab summit on Gaza earlier this month, arguing that it would have damaged "joint Arab action." The comments are the first acknowledgement by Egypt that it actively sought to prevent the Doha summit on January 16, which was the subject of a bitter tug-of-war between rival Arab states. It also indicated that a reconciliation meeting in Kuwait last week between Egypt and Saudi Arabia on one hand, and Qatar and Syria on the other, had only a short-term effect. Qatar failed to win enough support to hold a formal Arab League summit on Gaza but it went ahead anyway with an informal consultative meeting of Arab leaders and Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejhad The wrangling reflected deep divisions between Arab governments. On one side Saudi Arabia and Egypt, wary of the Islamist group Hamas in Gaza, favored discussing Gaza at a separate economic summit in Kuwait a few days later. Diplomats say Egypt resents the Qatari challenge to its traditional role as leading Arab mediator and dislikes the influence of the satellite television channel Al Jazeera, which is based in Doha and owned by the Qatari government. The Egyptian minister also criticized Hamas for what he called its coup

against the forces of the Palestinian Authority in the Gaza Strip in 2007.

France for Role in Middle East Peace and Lebanon Stability

French Presidential Envoy Philippe Marini said his visit to Lebanon aims at following up topics related to Middle East peace and Lebanese-Syrian relations. Marini said France is keen on "Lebanon's national unity, pluralist character and preparations for the forthcoming parliamentary elections." The French envoy, talking to reporters after meeting Premier Fouad Saniora, said he hopes Lebanon "would be able to express itself freely and honestly through its

constitutional institutions." Lebanon's relations with France are "very distinguished," Marini said. He said President Nicolas Sarkozy has assigned him to discuss all topics "within the framework of the impact of a new U.S. Administration and what France can do to facilitate the peace process in the Middle East."

Security Directorate Denies Bugging Charge

The General Directorate for General Security denied assigning an officer to the ministry of telecommunications to bug telephone calls. The directorate, in a statement, said charges made by Progressive Socialist Party leader Walid Jumblat in this respect are "baseless."

Syria Approves First Lebanese Ambassador to Damascus

Syria has approved the nomination of Michel el-Khoury as Lebanon's first ever ambassador to Damascus, Lebanese Foreign Minister Fawzi Salloukh announced "I have received a letter from Syria's interim charge d'affaires in Beirut indicating that Syrian authorities have agreed to Khoury's nomination as Lebanese ambassador to Syria," Salloukh told reporters. He said Syria has yet to submit the name of its candidate as ambassador to Lebanon. Khoury, 59, was previously ambassador to The Hague and held top diplomatic posts in several countries including Britain, Brazil, and Mexico. Syria and Lebanon in October formally established diplomatic ties for the first time since both became independent 60 years ago. The move turned a page in relations between Lebanon and Syria, which dominated its smaller neighbor for nearly three decades until it pulled its troops out in April 2005.

Lebanese-French Program to Strengthen Airport Security

Lebanon and France are working on a project that aims at strengthening security and safety measures at Beirut's Rafik Hariri International Airport. According to the daily As-Safir on Wednesday, the 36-month project, worth 1.5 million Euros, focuses on strengthening operational and technical capabilities of all airport apparatuses, and responding to emergencies. The program also includes a special training center that works on developing security skills. The center, which opened on January 5, offers its training services to personnel from customs, internal and general security forces, civil aviation and the Lebanese army.

Attack on Lebanese Musicians in Jordan Linked to al-Qaida

Jordanian authorities revealed a link between the attack on Lebanese musicians performing in downtown Amman last July and the terrorist group al-Qaida. Twelve Jordanians of Palestinian origin went on trial Tuesday on charges that included shooting members of Saint-Esprit University's (USEK) choir in downtown Amman last July. Six tourists, including four Lebanese musicians, were wounded after a gunman opened fire on their bus. The 12 men stood quietly in the dock to hear the charges against them. In addition to shooting Lebanese musicians, the men faced charges of carrying out what the Jordanian military court described as terrorist attacks on a Christian church, a cemetery in the Arab country. They were also accused of making Molotov cocktails they hurled at the cemetery and church as well as the illegal possession of weapons. The indictment sheet said the prime suspect and the group's mastermind, Shaker al-Khatib, was trained in Lebanon by an alleged al-Qaida member to join the insurgents in Iraq. But al-Khatib, 28, instead returned to Jordan to form a militant cell there. He is originally from Gaza but has lived most of his life in Jordan's Palestinian refugee camp in northern Irbid. The indictment does not charge al-Khatib with belonging to al-Qaida, which is banned in Jordan, although it says al-Khatib recruited others for the terror network through the Internet and at mosque gatherings. The charge sheet said the group decided to attack Christians in Jordan after allegedly discovering that a young Christian boy was sending cell phone messages mocking Islam's Prophet Mohammed and the Qoran. It said the group first attacked a cemetery near Irbid last July, throwing Molotov cocktails inside it, and later attacked a church in the city in the same manner. The suspects were all arrested later in July. In a separate attack last July, another suspect opened fire on the group of Lebanese musicians from USEK performing in downtown Amman. He wounded six people, none of them seriously, before shooting himself in the head.

France to Withdraw Warships Serving with UNIFIL

France will pull more than 2,000 troops out of Ivory Coast and Chad and withdraw two warships from a U.N. force off south Lebanon, Prime Minister Francois Fillon said Fillon announced the changes in an address to parliament which was to vote on extending five military operations in Africa and the Balkans, part of France's 13,000-strong deployment abroad. A total of 1,100 of the 2,000 troops based in Ivory Coast will leave the former French colony because "the security risks are no longer as intense," said Fillon. At least 1,000 French troops serving in a European Union force in Chad and in the Central African Republic will be withdrawn by the summer as a U.N. force takes over the mission. That will leave a French contingent of 650 in the EU force. Two warships monitoring waters off the Lebanon coast as part of the UNIFIL force will be assigned to new missions, said Fillon. France's operations in Afghanistan, where it is one of the

biggest contributors to the international military force with more than 2,600 troops, will not be affected by the cuts. Defense Minister Herve Morin said earlier that one fifth of France's troops abroad would be coming home as the military adjusted to new realities on the ground. President Nicolas Sarkozy last year announced a major overhaul of the military that calls for sweeping cuts in the armed forces and massive investment in intelligence. Morin said in a separate interview with France Soir newspaper that a 20 percent reduction in troop numbers overseas would save the state 100 to 150 million Euros (130 to 200 million dollars) per year. French lawmakers approved the operation in Afghanistan in September, but Paris says it has no plans to send more troops to the country despite U.S. plans to step up the pressure on a resurgent Taliban. France also has 1,900 troops serving in Lebanon, 2,000 in Kosovo and 150 in Bosnia. Parliament was to vote on the missions in Kosovo, Lebanon, Ivory Coast, Chad and the Central African Republic

Social front

MTV Resumes Broadcasting March 31

MTV's chairman of the board Michel Gabriel Murr announced that the station will resume broadcasting on March 31 after a seven-year interruption.
The TV network "never died and we paid a high price. It would become the voice of the silent majority," Murr said during a press conference held at the station's headquarters in Naccache, north of Beirut. MTV network would appear on the screen after more than seven years of interruption by a court order issued during Syrian hegemony over Lebanon.

Palestine and Israel

Dozens suffered teargas inhalation during the Bil'in Weekly Demonstration

People left the village of Bil'in, located near the central West Bank city of Ramallah after Friday prayers in a massive demonstration, in which a group of international and Israeli peace activists. Waving Palestinian flags, and banners people marched calling for solidarity with the people of Gaza, and for the prosecution of war criminals and leaders of the Israeli occupation soldiers, as well as slogans calling to national unity. The march drew a crowd of cadres and members and supporters of the Palestinian Popular Struggle Front, hoisting banners and chanting slogans calling for unity and the removal of settlements and the wall and lifting the siege on Gaza. The demonstrators marched in the streets of the village, chanting slogans the same content, and calls for national unity, and condemning the policy of occupation, racism and the construction of the wall and the settlements. Demonstrators then headed towards the wall to try to get into their land, but the army has been stationed since early morning in the west of the village behind

the cubes concrete, and when the demonstrators tried to approach, the soldiers sprayed them by sgooting gas and sound bombs and rubber-coated metal bullets, and live bullets of the type of 0,2. Dozens were treated for gas inhalation.

Spanish Judge accepts PCHR lawsuit against senior Israeli officials, Israel to appeal decision

A Spanish judge accepted a lawsuit filed by the Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR) against senior Israeli officials for committing war crimes against the Palestinian people after the officials gave the go ahead for shelling the house of a senior Hamas leader in 2002, killing 15 Palestinians and wounding more than 100, the Arabs48 news website reported. At least nine of the casualties in the shelling were children and women. The Israeli Army dropped a 15 ton bomb on the house of Salah Shihada, a Hamas leader. The Spanish Judge, Fernando Andreu, accepted the lawsuit, which was filed by the PCHR, and sent two letters; one to Israel informing Israeli officials that a probe is underway, and the second to the Palestinian Authority informing them that the case has been accepted. Israel claims that Shihada is responsible for hundreds of attacks against Israeli targets, and considers him the person in charge of communication between the political and military leaders of Hamas. He was considered in charge of all Hamas' military actions since the beginning of the al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000.

BBC refusal to air Gaza aid appeal sparks protests

A decision by the British Broadcasting Corporation to refuse to air an appeal for humanitarian aid for Gaza has led to protests from a number of groups and within the BBC itself.

Protesters gathered outside the headquarters of the British state television service to burn their tv permits, while the station has received thousands of complaints. The appeal was put out by a dozen large international aid groups, asking for donations to address the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. It did not mention Israel, or the fact that the widespread destruction in Gaza was caused by three weeks of bombardment by the Israeli military. Despite the apolitical nature of the ad, the head of the BBC, Mark Thompson, said that he decided not to air the appeal. He gave two reasons: one, that the aid was unlikely to get into the Gaza Strip, and two, that the BBC is still covering the news from the region, and airing an appeal for the victims would challenge their impartiality. Critics of the decision, including BBC reporters, point out that every humanitarian aid appeal comes in the midst of news stories. Appeals for the victims in Darfur, in Indonesia, and every other appeal aired by the BBC over the last thirty years has come in the midst of ongoing news coverage of events, and the network has never before made a decision like this one.

Israeli warplanes raid Gaza-Egypt border

Israeli warplanes on Thursday dawn hit the Gaza-Egypt border line in southern Gaza and a metal workshop in the area. Witnesses said that Israeli warplanes shelled the Assalam neighborhood in the area, and that a metal workshop in the city was also hit during the air strikes. Meanwhile, Israeli tanks that invaded the eastern parts of Deir Elbalah in central Gaza Strip yesterday pulled back after Israeli bulldozers razed vast areas of Palestinian-owned lands. Gaza-based resistance factions resumed homemade shell-fire into nearby Israeli towns, as the Israeli attacks continued in the area despite the ceasefire declaration on January 18th in the wake of a three-week Israeli massive attacks on the coastal region. Israeli media reports that a number of homemade shells landed in nearby southern Israeli areas. No causalities have been reported.

Israeli forces demolish Palestinian-owned home in Jerusalem

Israeli military bulldozers demolished on Wednesday morning a Palestinian-owned flat, located in Silwan neighborhood in Jerusalem city. The home, located in a building, is the home of Talal Al Shoki, and his eight family members. Local sources reported that this is the second time his flat has been demolished by the Israeli military. Witnesses said that Israeli troops and a bulldozer arrived in the area early in the morning, forcing the family out before demolishing the walls of their home.

The Israeli authorities say that the flat was built without the required construction permission. Since Israel occupied the city of Jerusalem in 1967, it has rarely given its Palestinian residents permission to build homes, while funding and building hundreds of homes in illegal settlements in and around the city of Jerusalem. Ahmad Al Rowidi, head of Jerusalem affairs in the office Palestinian President was at the scene. Rowidi told reporters that the Israeli authorities are planning to demolish 100 Palestinian homes in several parts of Jerusalem this year.

Israel reopens Gaza commercial crossings

The Israeli military reopened on Wednesday morning all Gaza's commercial crossings after it closed them yesterday, following renewed violence in the region, Palestinian sources said. The sources added that the Israelis have informed the Palestinians that the crossings would be reopened to allow for the entry of dozens of trucks, loaded with assistance to the Gaza Strip. Raed Fatouh, of the Palestinian crossings administration, was quoted as saying that 110 trucks are loaded with humanitarian assistance, while 36 others are loaded with wheat, milk, fruits and fertilized eggs. All shipments will be allowed in through the southern Israeli commercial crossing of Kerem Shalom or Abu Salem. Also, 80 more shipments will be entering through the Karni crossing, to the east of Gaza city, Fattouh explained, adding that some quantities of industrialized crude fuel and cooking gas will be allowed in through the Nahal Auz fuel terminal in eastern Gaza City. Yesterday, Israeli defense minister, Ehud Barak, ordered the closure of Gaza crossings following a roadside bomb blast that killed an Israeli soldier and wounded three

others in southern Gaza. Earlier on Wednesday, Israeli warplanes bombarded the Gaza-Egypt border line, destroying a number of underground tunnels, used by Palestinians to bring in goods and commodities from the nearby Egypt, and causing damages to nearby Palestinian homes. Violence in Gaza broke out after one-week calm in the area, in the wake of a massive three-week Israeli Army raid on the coastal enclave, under the pretext of halting homemade shell-fire from Gaza into nearby Israeli towns.

Israel cuts diplomatic ties with Venezuela

The Israeli government have expelled the Venezuelan Embesy staff in Tel Aviv, cutting diplomatic relations with the country. According to Israeli media sources, the Israeli Foreign Ministry notified earlier this week the Venezuelan diplomats in Israeli to leave within 72 hours. The Israeli government says that this move comes in response to the Venezuelan President's, Hugo Chavez, decision to expel the Israeli Ambassador from Caracas earlier this month. Venezuela was the first country to expel the Israeli ambassador and to withdraw its ambassador to Israel in protest to the war launched against the people in the Gaza Strip. Bolivia joined Venezuela and decided to sever ties with Israel in protest to the Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip. Bolivia's President, Evo Morales, during a speech at a ceremony for ambassadors to Bolivia earlier this month said that he was breaking relations with Israel over its invasion of the Gaza Strip, and he also said that he will ask the International Criminal Court to bring charges of genocide against top Israeli officials. Israel announced the unilateral ceasefire on Sunday, January 17th, 2009, after the Israeli Army embarked on a 22-day military offensive which began on Saturday, December 27th, 2008. Homes, schools, mosques, UN centers, and media agencies were attacked by Israeli air, sea, and ground forces leaving at least 1,330 Palestinians dead.

Mitchell affirms the United States' commitment to push the peace process in the M.E

The US President's special envoy to the Middle East, George Mitchell, arrived to the Egyptian capital on Wednesday. Mitchell is to meet with President Hussni Mobarak in Cairo. His visit is part of an effort to push for a peace process in the region. In a press conference after his meeting with President Mubarak, Mitchell said that US President Obama and his administration is committed to peace and stability in the Middle East. He added that he will finalize a report to the White House as soon as his tour of the region is finished. Mitchell's current tour will include meeting with regional and EU leaders, in addition to talks with Palestinian and Israeli leadership. He also added that the US greatly admires Egypt's role in achieving a ceasefire in Gaza.

Israel closes all Gaza border crossings

The Gaza-based border crossings administration announced that the Israeli occupation authorities sealed off all Gaza's crossings on Tuesday morning The closure came right after an explosion near the Israeli military Kissufim crossing in southern Gaza, in which an Israeli soldier was killed and few other soldiers were wounded earlier this morning. Also on Tuesday morning, the Israeli army shot dead a Palestinian farmer in the same area . Israeli defense minister, Ehud Barak , had earlier stated that the latest three-week Israeli army attacks on the coastal Strip would help accelerate the release of Israeli soldier Gil'ad Shalit, captured by Hamas since June2006. Amidst such new developments, Israeli and Palestinian officials including those of Hamas party, have been negotiating in Cairo over renewed truce talks as well as working out a prisoner swap deal. According to Palestinian medics, the said Israeli attacks left approximately 1330 Palestinians killed , nearly half of them are women and children, and more than 5500 others wounded, as the death toll is on the rise due to hundreds of critically wounded.

To help controlling the Gaza Egypt borders: Germany send military experts to Egypt

Israeli sources announced on Tuesday that Germany have sent a team of 6 military experts to Egypt to help in controlling the borders with the Gaza Strip. the German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, said that Germany believe that stopping the weapons going to Gaza will create a stable cease fire. US experts visited the borders earlier to decide on the locations of the new equipments the US is going to install to detect tunnels between the borders. Gazans have use the tunnels to smuggle food and much needed medicine and fuel supplies into Gaza during the past six month because Israeli have placed the coastal region under total closer.

Hamas blames Israel for post truce violence

Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas, said that Israel is to be held responsible for the post-truce violence as the Israeli army killed several Palestinians after the truce was declared. On Tuesday, one Palestinian and one soldier were killed in renewed violence. Mosheer Al Masry of Hamas said that “the Zionists are responsible for the violence”, and added that the movement would retaliate to the Israeli offensives. Meanwhile, Israeli officials said that the army would respond harshly to “violations of the cease-fire”.

On Tuesday morning, the Israeli army fired a shell at Khan Younis, in the southern part of the Gaza Strip and killed one resident. The slain resident, Anwar Zayid AL Breem, 24, is the third Palestinian killed by the army since the truce was achieved on January 18. Also on Tuesday, the Israeli air force fired a missile at a motorcyclist wounding him along with two children who were playing in the shelled area. Furthermore, the Israeli army said that one soldier was killed in a roadside bomb explosion in southern Gaza. Three other soldiers were wounded. Israeli online daily, Ynet News, said that the attack was carried out by a group affiliated with Al Qaeda and calls itself “Jihad and Tawhid Brigades”. The Ynet added that this group delivered an announcement to Ramattan news Agency.

Israeli warplanes bombard the Gaza-Egypt border line

Israeli warplanes bombarded early morning on Wednesday the Gaza-Egypt border line in southern Gaza, destroying a number of underground tunnels, used by Palestinians to bring in essential goods and commodities from Egypt, as Israel continues to keep all Gaza border crossings closed for 20 months now. Witnesses said that Israeli warplanes fired three missiles toward the border area, and that some damage was inflicted to nearby Palestinian-owned houses. Spokesperson of the Israeli Army confirmed that the Israeli air raids on the area came in response to yesterday's blast of a military jeep in the southeastern Gaza-Israel border line, where one Israeli soldier was killed and three others were injured. Yesterday, Israeli tanks rolled into Palestinian areas close to the blast location, as military bulldozers razed vast areas of Palestinian-owned lands. Right after the explosion, caused by a roadside bomb, an Israeli drone fired a missile toward a motorcyclist in the southern Khan Younis town, wounding him severely. Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, reiterated the belief that the latest one-week ceasefire was fragile, as his foreign and defense ministers vowed to respond to yesterday's explosion as swiftly as possible. Violence in the region broke out after the ruling Hamas party committed to an Israeli Army ceasefire, following a three-week Israeli military onslaught on Gaza, where more than 1,341 Palestinians, half of them women and children, were killed and more than 5,500 others were wounded. Other Gaza-based factions including the Popular Resistance Committees, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Islamic Jihad group, called for continuing resistance against the Israeli occupation as long as the Gaza crossings remain closed. Concurrently, negotiators of the Hamas party are holding talks in Cairo over reaching a truce with Israel and reopening crossings, which Israel closed in the wake of Hamas' takeover of Gaza, amidst factional fighting with the Fatah party of Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas in June of 2007.

Meanwhile, Hamas' prime minister, Ismail Haniya, denounced a French decision to send military ships to Gaza shores for monitoring arms smuggling. The PM also agreed that the league of Arab states take responsibility for reconstructing Gaza, which is estimated to cost about 2.4 billion U.S Dollars.

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GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL (GCC)
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DETAILED REPORT

GCC

GCC states have failed to manage waste effectively, says expert

DOHA Head of the Friends of Environment Centre (FEC) Saif al Hajri said here on Tuesday that GCC countries have so far failed to manage their domestic waste effectively despite the best efforts of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the civil society. He made this statement at a seminar on recycling in the Arabian Gulf, organised by FEC and UNESCO bureau here on Tuesday.

He hoped that more work would be done in the future regarding environment awareness. "Unfortunately GCC countries did not even reach 50 percent in waste management. We need to act immediately and follow the examples of other countries that have succeeded in the waste management field", he said. Habiba al Marashi of UAE Environment Group said no organisation was fully committed to environment preservation. "There should be more recycling facilities and companies that collect waste. They are either funded by the private sector or the government,", she said.

SAUDI ARAB

IR Desk

Israel's war crimes must be probed: Kingdom

Saudi Arabia yesterday called for an extensive investigation of Israel's war crimes in Gaza and said the Jewish state must be held responsible for its acts in defiance of international laws and charters.

The Council of Ministers, chaired by Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah, said Israel launched its 22-day blitz on Gaza ignoring the Arab peace initiative, which was offered by the Arab summit in Beirut in 2002. The meeting condemned the criminal large-scale destruction of property and infrastructure in the Palestinian territory, which was in clear violation of international humanitarian law.

British education delegation at JCCI

The largest British higher education delegation of its kind to visit the Kingdom opens its doors here to the general public for two days beginning today.

Awasser forges alliance with Cairo hospital

The Saudi Charitable Society for the Welfare of Saudi Families Abroad (Awasser) has forged alliances with a leading hospital in Cairo to provide health care to Saudi families in Egypt.

Abdullah, Obama discuss Mideast

Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah received yesterday a telephone call from US President Barack Obama. The two leaders discussed developments in the Middle East, the Saudi Press Agency reported.

On Thursday, Obama appointed George Mitchell, a former Senate majority leader, America's Middle East envoy. Mitchell played an important role in negotiating peace in Northern Ireland with the signing of the Belfast Peace Agreement in 1998.

Mothers of Saudis jailed in Iraq seek government help

Mothers of Saudis who volunteered to fight in Iraq and who were captured are living in misery. These mothers cannot live a normal life knowing that their sons are in Iraqi prisons. These mothers are hoping that the Saudi government would speed up efforts to bring their children back home, the daily Al-Riyadh reported recently.

Yemen rejected US plan to send inmates to Saudi Arabia: Saleh

Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh said yesterday that his country had rejected a US proposal to send 94 Yemeni detainees from the military prison in Guantanamo, Cuba, to Saudi Arabia to be rehabilitated.

"The administration of former US President George W. Bush has contacted us and told us of its plans to extradite the Yemeni detainees to Saudi Arabia, where they could be sent through a rehabilitation program," Saleh said in a speech during an annual conference for police commanders in Sanaa.

Saudi Arabia for Probe into Israeli War Crimes

Saudi Arabia has called for a probe into Israel's war crimes in Gaza, saying the Jewish state must be held responsible for its acts in defiance of international laws and charters. The Council of Ministers, chaired by Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz on Monday, said.

Saudi hails Obama's stance towards Arab world

Saudi Arabia, one of Washington's top allies in the Middle East, on Tuesday hailed new US President Barack Obama's desire to bolster ties with the Arab world.

Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal praised Obama for "his desire to have a strong and fruitful relationship with the Arab world" and said his stance was a "positive development".

SAUDI MONARCH RECEIVES CALL FROM YEMENI PRESIDENT

CUSTODIAN OF THE TWO HOLY MOSQUES KING ABDULLAH BIN ABDULAZIZ AL SAUD RECEIVED TODAY A TELEPHONE CALL FROM YEMENI PRESIDENT ALI ABDULLAH SALEH. THEY DISCUSSED BILATERAL RELATIONS AS WELL AS REGIONAL, ARAB AND INTERNATIONAL ISSUES OF COMMON CONCERN.

GUL TO MEET KING ABDULLA AL SAUD

TURKISH PRESIDENT ABDULLA GUL WILL VISIT TURKEY ON 3RD OF FEBRUARY TO MEET THE CUSTODIAN OF THE TWO HOLY MOSQUES KING ABDULLA BIN ABDULAZIZ AL SAUD. THE TURKISH AMBASSADOR TO RIYADH NAJI KORO SAID THE TURKISH - SAUDI SUMMIT WILL TACKLE THE SITUATIONS IN GAZA AFTER WAR AND DEVELOPMENTS AT THE MIDDLE EAST REGION INCLUDING IRAQ.

Social Desk

Kingdom re-arrests ex- Guantanamo inmates

As part of efforts to stop former Saudi detainees at Guantanamo rejoining militant groups such as Al-Qaeda, the authorities have rearrested nine men, including former inmates of the US detention center in Cuba.

"An official statement has already been issued about the arrests," said Lt. Gen. Mansour Al-Turki, spokesman for the Ministry of Interior. He added that citizens and residents who violate the Kingdom's laws would be arrested.

Nograles reaches out to Filipino community

Prospero Nograles, speaker of the Philippines' House of Representatives, heard the problems of the Filipino community in Riyadh on Saturday night. He was keen to know in what way he or the Congress may be able to help Pinoys living in the Kingdom.

"While we are here, we're taking this opportunity to meet with you and find out how or in what way we could be of help to you," he told a gathering of the Filipino community.

Alternative punishments under consideration, says minister

Justice Minister Abdullah Al-Asheikh said yesterday that his ministry was studying alternative punishments to imprisonment, in association with other government departments and agencies.

"We have already distributed questionnaires among judges to gather their ideas and proposals on alternative punishments. Many judges favor the idea saying it would contribute to reforming the accused," he said.

Minister, you can't silence us

When meeting Abdullah Yousuf Al-Ghatham, a 23-year-old Saudi, one wonders whether Chicago's 442-meter tall Sears Tower fell on his dreams? Al-Ghatham looks sad and depressed.

He was not like this a year ago. He used to read and write. He used to stroll like a gazelle in the lobbies of the Sociology College of King Saud University. The change, however, came after he joined Ahsa General Hospital as a nurse. He has been morbid and burdened

ever since. His basic salary of SR1,600 disappears before it comes. He does not think of getting married, let alone having children. He is always wondering who would marry him?

Road projects given priority in Jeddah's 2009 budget

Mayor of Jeddah Adel Fakieh announced yesterday a SR1.3 billion municipal budget for 2009, which includes projects to develop the city's roads, build parks, establish a forest around the sewage lake and make the city an internationally acclaimed tourist destination.

Speaking to reporters at his office, Fakieh expressed his gratitude to Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah for appointing him as mayor for the fourth consecutive year.

Women may issue Fatwas: conference

Islamic scholars have softened their position with regard to the topic of whether competent women scholars are qualified to issue religious edicts (Fatwas) or not.

"Issuing Fatwa is not restricted to men alone. Well-qualified women scholars can also do it," this was the message given by the recently concluded Makkah International Conference on Fatwa and Its Regulations. The "Fatwa Charter," which will serve as a guideline on the issuing of Fatwas, adopted by some 170 prominent Islamic scholars from around the world, does not contain any provisions that prohibit women from issuing Fatwas.

Saudi man jailed for hosting mixed concert

A Saudi businessman was sentenced to four months in prison and 200 lashes for hosting a mixed concert at his fun park in the Muslim holy city of Mecca, a newspaper reported on Tuesday.

The man was arrested after an argument with agents from the powerful religious police who ordered him to end the concert, the daily Okaz said. A court found the man guilty of hindering the work of the agents of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, known as Muttawa, and involvement in 'organising a concert where men and women mix.'

Norwegian diplomat receives accolades from Saudis

An e-mail sent by Trine Lilleng, first secretary at the Norwegian embassy in Riyadh, triggered a huge controversy in both the diplomatic and political circles in Norway and Israel.

In the email, Lilleng compared Israel's offensive in Gaza with events in the Second

World War and the persecution of Jews. The Norwegian Foreign Ministry distanced itself from the e-mail, while the Norwegian embassy refused to comment on the issue.

Mandatory health plans for Saudis within six months

A mandatory health insurance scheme is to be applied on 1.5 million Saudis working in the private sector and their families within six months, said Dr. Abdullah Al-Sharief, secretary-general of the Cooperative Health Insurance Council.

Al-Sharief said insurance companies are ready to provide health insurance cover to Saudi employees, adding that insurance providers in the Kingdom include 25 government hospitals. “We expect 25 more public hospitals will enter the service shortly.”

Economic Desk

Auto firms will be in defensive mode: Ghosn

Participants at the Global Competitiveness Forum (GCF), which opened yesterday in Riyadh, focused on the current global financial crisis which has affected many countries.

More than 100 leaders and 1,000 delegates from all parts of the globe gathered in the capital here to discuss solutions to the global financial crisis under the theme entitled “Responsible Competitiveness.” The forum sponsored by Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority (SAGIA) also provided foreign participants to get an insight into investment opportunities in Saudi Arabia. Around 20 panel discussions have been scheduled to take place during the course of the three-day forum.

BAHRAIN

IR Desk

Give Obama a chance, Bahraini cleric says

A Bahraini religious leader yesterday called for giving incoming US President Barack Obama a genuine chance to address issues related to Arabs and Muslims, saying that he deserved a greater tolerance span and that "sofa detractors" should avoid engaging in vitriolic attacks against him and his administration.

Israel planned Gaza attack nearly one year ago, says academic

Israel launched its attacks on Gaza to foil a peaceful offensive by Hamas, said American academic Norman Finkelstein.

Finkelstein dismissed claims that Hamas was responsible for the onslaught, saying that there was no evidence that supported the "misconceptions". "There is no evidence in my opinion to support this claim. The records show very clearly that, as Israeli newspapers themselves reported, the attack on Gaza had been planned as early as March 2007," said Finkelstein, ahead of two lectures he is delivering in Manama on "the real motives behind Israel's massacre in Gaza" and on the power of the Israeli lobby in the US.

MINISTER OF PRIME MINISTER'S COURT SHAIKH KHALID BIN ABDULLA AL KHALIFA RECEIVED HERE TODAY THE CHINESE AMBASSADOR TO BAHRAIN LI ZHIGUO.

HE MEETING DISCUSSED FRIENDLY AND COOPERATION TIES LINKING BOTH COUNTRIES AND WHICH WAS CROWNED BY THE RECENT VISIT OF THE PRIME MINISTER TO CHINA.

BAHRAIN TAKES PART IN OIC CONFERENCE

THE CONFERENCE WILL DISCUSS A NUMBER OF ISSUES, INCLUDING THE PALESTINIAN CAUSE, INTERACTION WITH FOREIGN MEDIA, AN AGREEMENT ON A MEDIA ETHICAL GUIDE FOR MEMBER STATES, ACTIVATION OF THE MEDIA AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS SECTOR AND THE ORGANIZATION OF AN ANNUAL FUND- RAISER BY NATIONAL TV CORPORATIONS OF OIC MEMBER STATES TO FACE HUMANITARIAN CRISES.

FM MEETS UN SPECIAL ENVOY

MINISTER AND BRIEFED HIM ON THE EFFORTS OF THE UN IN THE REGION. THE MEETING ALSO REVIEWED UN EFFORTS IN ISSUES CONCERNING THE MIDDLE EAST, ESPECIALLY THE PALESTINIAN CAUSE AND THE PEACE PROCESS, AS WELL AS OTHER TOPICS RELATED TO INTERNATIONAL SECURITY AND PEACE. MEANWHILE, FOREIGN MINISTER SHAIKH KHALID AFFIRMED THE ROLE OF UN ORGANISATIONS IN SUPPORTING PALESTINIANS AND ALLEVIATING THEIR HUMANITARIAN PLIGHT. LARSEN IN TURN PRAISED THE EFFORTS OF BAHRAIN FOR THE RELIEF OF PALESTINIANS AND OFFERING THEM IN KIND AID. IN THIS CONTEXT, THE TWO SIDES AGREED ON INVITING THE THE COMMISSIONER GENERAL OF THE UNITED NATIONS RELIEF AND WORKS AGENCY (UNRWA) KAREN ABUZAYD TO BAHRAIN FOR COORDINATING THE PROVISION OF AID TO PALESTINIANS.

DHAHRANI BACKS UP BAHRAINI TURKISH COOPERATION

REPRESENTATIVES COUNCIL CHAIRMAN KHALIFA BIN AHMED AL DHAHRANI HAS EXPRESSED SUPPORT TO THE INTENDED ESTABLISHMENT OF A SPECIALIZED CENTER FOR UNIVERSITY STUDIES, RESEARCH AND

INFORMATION IN ARAB GULF AND TURKISH AFFAIRS, UNDERLINING THE NEED TO AVAIL OF THE TURKISH EXPERTISE AND BOLSTER BAHRAIN'S TIES WITH ANKARA IN THIS FIELD.

Economic Desk

Bahrain real estate market is 'stable'

The real estate market in Bahrain is stable and rumors about the steep fall in prices are not based on facts. Bahrain's real estate sector will continue to be safe for developers and investors, a top official at the $700 million project said.

BIGGEST ISLAMIC BANK IN BAHRAIN NEXT JUNE

THE BIGGEST ISLAMIC BANK IN THE WORLD WILL ESTABLISH IN BAHRAIN BY THE ISLAMIC BANK FOR DEVELOPMENT AND OTHER INVESTORS NEXT JUNE WITH A PREPAID CAPITAL OF 11 BILLION DOLLARS IN ORDER TO ENHANCE DEVELOPMENT IN THE ISLAMIC NATIONS, SAID THE GENERAL COUNCIL OF ISLAMIC FINANCIAL FIRMS.

HEAD OF UNION OF ARAB BANKS AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF AL BARAKA BANKING GROUP ADNAN YOUSIF TOLD BAHRAINI DAILY " AL WATAN" THAT THE BANK AIMED AT FINANCING DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS THAT SERVE THE SOCIETY. YOUSIF EXPECTED THAT BAHRAIN'S SHARE IN THE BANK WOULD BE 10 OR 15 PERCENT AND OTHER SHARES OF ARAB AND ISLAMIC COUNTRIES WOULD BE DECIDED AT THE FOUNDATION MEETING OF THE BANK.

Social Desk

Global crisis won't affect Kingdom's development works: Prince Miteb

Dismissing the implication that the global economic downturn could stymie Saudi development projects, Municipal and Rural Affairs Minister Prince Miteb said yesterday that the Kingdom would continue to carry out its development program in the coming years without any interruption.

The minister made his comments while opening the Third Global Competitiveness Forum here on behalf of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah.

Bahrain Shia activists accused of aiding terrorism

Three Shia opposition activists in Bahrain were arrested on Monday and accused of training and financing a terror group, trying to overthrow the regime and inciting opposition, a lawyer told AFP.

Jalila al-Sayed, who is defending Hassan Mesheima, the head of the opposition group Haq ('Rights' in Arabic), said the three charges are based onoffences in Sunni-ruled state's anti-terrorism law.

MOU SIGNED IN PREPARATION FOR EGOVERNMENT FORUM

A MEMO OF UNDERSTANDING WAS SIGNED HERE TODAY BY THE EGOVERNMENT AUTHORITY, THE BAHRAIN SOCIETY OF ENGINEERS, THE BAHRAIN INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY SOCIETY, THE BAHRAIN INTERNET SOCIETY TO ORGANIZE AND RUN BAHRAIN INTERNATIONAL FORUM FOR EGOVERNMENT 2009.

THE FORUM WILL BE HELD FOR THE SECOND CONSECUTIVE YEAR AT INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION AND CONFERENCES CENTER ON MAY 25-27, 2009, UNDER THE PATRONAGE OF DEPUTY PREMIER AND HEAD OF THE SUPREME ICT COMMITTEE SHAIKH MOHAMMED BIN MUBARAK AL KHALIFA.

LABOUR MINISTER OPENS CAREER FAIR

BAHRAINI ECONOMY IS DOING FINE AND IS STILL OFFERING JOB OPPORTUNITIES IN ITS VARIOUS INDUSTRIAL AND PRODUCTIVE SECTORS, THE LABOUR MINISTER SAID.

THERE ARE MANY JOBS OCCUPIED BY EXPATRIATE EMPLOYEES WHO COULD BE REPLACED BY NATIONAL MANPOWER, HE SAID. THE MINISTER SAID THE BAHRAINISATION SYSTEM AGREED UPON WITH THE LABOUR MARKET REGULATORY AUTHORITY WAS DEEMED AS A STRONG FACTOR IN PROVIDING ADDED VALUE JOBS FOR CITIZENS. THE MINISTER WAS SPEAKING TODAY AS HE OPENED THE SIXTH CAREER FAIR ORGANISED BY THE MINISTRY AT THE SANABIS INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL FOR GIRLS. HE HOPED THAT IT WOULD MEET THE REQUIREMENTS OF SERIOUS JOB SEEKERS.

UAE

Economic Desk

Do More to Curb Credit Card Fraud

There is a need for special legislation and tougher measures to curb electronic and credit card fraud, which caused more than $700 million worth of losses to financial institutions across the world last year, said a top officer from Dubai Police.

Major-General Khamis Mattar Al Mazeina, Deputy Commander-in-Chief of Dubai Police, suggested introduction of pin codes in order to prevent credit card fraud.

Emirates Announces Special Fares

Emirates Airlines has announced cheaper fares for flights to 85 destinations for those who book between now and February 15 to travel till May 31.

Adnan Kazim, Emirates' senior vice-president, commercial operations for Gulf, Middle East and Iran, said on Tuesday that the prices of the first, business and economy class tickets issued in the UAE to the destinations, including cities in India, China, the US, Europe, the GCC, the Middle East, Africa and Australia, have been revised.

UAE Industrial Investments Rise 6pc to Dh77 Billion

Annual investments in UAE's industrial sector rose six per cent to Dh77 billion in 2008 from Dh72.6 billion in 2007, according to the UAE Ministry of Economy. The number of industrial units in the UAE grew to 4,219 from 3,852 in 2007, the Annual Industrial Report 2008 released on Tuesday by the Ministry shows. The sector employs over 318,000 people compared to 290,000 jobs in 2007.

Islamic Bank Signs Deal to Fight Poverty

A first of its kind memorandum of understanding (MoU) has been signed between the Islamic Development Bank and the United Kingdom Department for International Development for joint efforts to eliminate global poverty and promoting development. The MoU was signed by the bank's President Ahmed Mohammed Ali and Michael Foster.

IR Desk

UAE joins global green agency

The UAE on Monday joined the International Renewable Agency (IRENA) as a founding member, a statement from Masdar, Abu Dhabi Future Energy Company said. The UAE's Minister of Foreign Affairs Shaikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan yesterday signed the statute in Germany that established the IRENA.

OMAN

IR Desk

Endangered Arabian leopards to be tracked

Joint survey between Oman and Yemen, to track down Arabian leopards, the last surviving species of the big cats, was possible in near future, says a senior Omani conservationist.

"We strongly believe that these leopards cross borders between Oman and Yemen and we need to take steps for a collaboration with Yemen to track down these cats and their trails," Khalifa Bin Hamed Al Jahwari, Senior Specialist for Wildlife Conservation of the Environment at the Diwan of Royal Court, told *Gulf News* yesterday.

Oman and Qatar Vow to Step Up Cooperation

Oman and Qatar, at a high level meeting here on Monday, voiced a joint desire to step up bilateral cooperation.

Visiting Qatari Crown Prince Shaikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani and the Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, Sayyid Fahad bin Mahmood Al Said, reviewed existing ties between the two countries and agreed to reinforce relations in the economic, political and social fields. They discussed the results of meetings of joint committees in the sectors of gas, higher education, manpower and investment, an official statement said.

Dar Al Sharq raises QR242,500 for Gaza

Dar Al Sharq has donated QR242,500 to support Sheikh Eid Charity's projects in the Gaza Strip. The amount represents six days of sales of newspapers.

The humanitarian gesture is a part of Dar Al Sharq's contribution to the efforts exerted by various local charity organisations to supply aid for the people in the Gaza Strip.

French Ambassador's visit

The French Ambassador to Qatar, Gilles Bonnaud (second right), and the Press Attaché at the French Embassy, Iman Abou El Seoud (right), visited The Peninsula's office yesterday and met with Editor-in-Chief Khalid Abdul Raheem Al Sayed and Managing Editor Rachel Morris.

QATAR

IR Desk

Qatar-US ties have taken off: American envoy

The impending launch of Qatar Airways' flights to Houston testifies to the strengthening relations between the two countries, US Ambassador to Qatar, Joseph LeBaron has said.

"The launch of Qatar Airways flights from Doha to Houston is proof that the relationship between our two countries is, quite literally, taking off," LeBaron said at a gala dinner on Sunday night hosted by Qatar Airways to highlight the leisure and business opportunities offered by its newest destination, which marks the airline's first foray into America's southern states.

Qatar does not import meat from South Africa

: Qatar does not import meat and livestock from South Africa, where cases of foot-and-mouth disease have been reported, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Urban Planning has said.

Dr Qassem Al Qahtani, Director of the Animal Resources Department at the ministry, said Qatar had banned the import of split-hoofed animals and their meat for some time, underlining that the ministry has always been keen to safeguard the health of citizens. "We do not hesitate to take all precautionary measures, if need be," Qahtani said.

Vietnam sees stronger Qatar ties

Vietnamese Ambassador Phung The Long has expressed optimism about his country's economy, politics and investment climate as well as bilateral relations with Qatar as Vietnam celebrates its New Year. He was speaking at an early reception held for the Vietnamese community to usher in the traditional Lunar New Year. The community will mark New Year's Day on January 26, a day after the Chinese celebration.

Social Desk

Call to cut subsidies on water, power

Qatar's policy-makers and experts on sustainable development have strongly recommended charging the nationals for their domestic consumption of water and electricity. They have also urged reducing the heavy subsidies enjoyed by both Qataris and the residents on the use of the country's non-renewable resources.

The ideas came up during a national seminar on "Achieving the Environmental Development Outcomes of the Qatar National Vision 2030", hosted by the General Secretariat for Development Planning (GSDP) here yesterday.

18 Indians committed suicide in 2008

Some 18 Indian residents committed suicide last year, the Indian embassy said yesterday, expressing concern over the matter. The death toll in the community last year was 231. Of this, as many as 31 perished in road accidents, while 18 died in their workplace.

Women's mini-marathn on Feb 28

Qatar is set to witness its first-ever women's mini-marathon next month. Standard Chartered Bank (StanChart) is sponsoring the event, being organised by Woman Today, the first working women's magazine in Qatar.

KUWAIT

Economic Desk

Call to step up efforts to improve local economy

National Assembly Speaker Jassem Al-Kharafi urged the government yesterday to step up its efforts to tackle the consequences of the global economic crisis and revive the national economy. A faltering resolve by the government could worsen the ramifications of the economic crisis, thus adding to the burdens of citizens," Al-Kharafi told reporters here.

Kuwait says backs Opec oil output cut if it helps

Opec producer Kuwait is seeking to stabilise the oil market and would support a further output cut if that helped, the Gulf Arab state's acting oil minister said on Tuesday.

"The primary concern is stability of the market. If that requires an output cut, so be it," Sheikh Mohammad Al Salem Al Sabah, who is also the foreign minister, told reporters when asked whether Opec should further cut production. "Opec's primary concern is...to reach a balance by which producers have an incentive to continue to produce and improve production capacity, while consumers would also benefit from a stable price."

Kuwait to own 16% of Gulf Bank

The Kuwait Investment Authority, the country's sovereign wealth fund, will own 16 per cent of Gulf Bank KSC after the commercial bank's capital increase.

Gulf Bank shareholders subscribed to 68 per cent of the capital increase, which ended late on Sunday, Fawzy Al Thunayan, general manager for board affairs at the bank, said in a phone interview yesterday from Kuwait.

IR Desk

Kuwait reiterates support for Palestine

Kuwait affirmed yesterday that it would always support the just cause of the Palestinian people and their dream of having their own independent state.

The assertion came within a statement by Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Acting Minister of Oil Sheikh Dr. Mohammad Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah during the regular National Assembly (Parliament) session on supporting Palestinians. Sheikh Mohammad said that Kuwait stance on the issue was crystal clear, adding that his country was among the first states to agree to the Arab initiative for peace in the Middle East.

ICM delegation visiting Gaza

The Islamic Constitutional Movement's (ICM) Women's Bureau recently held a public seminar at the Lawyers' Society, which that was attended by MP and head of the Global Forum for Islamic Parliamentarians Dr. Nasser Al-Sane', as well as Dr. Tareq Al-Suwaidan and the Social Reform Society's Women's Activities Group's Secretary General Salwa Al-Ayyoub, reported Al-Watan. The seminar began with those attending listening to a recording of a speech made by the late Hamas leader Nezar Rayyan, which he mad e the night before he was killed. Al-Ayyoub then gave a speech about the sufferings of the Palestinian women during over seventy years and during the recent aggression on Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

Social Desk

Assembly to probe scrapped Dow deal

The government tactically outclassed its opponents in the National Assembly yesterday when MPs passed a proposal that calls for a relatively mild investigation into a controversial deal with US firm Dow Chemical. Three proposals were put before the Assembly, two of them calling for a wide investigation of the Dow deal, the fourth refinery at Al-Zour, oil sales to Iraq and reports that Kuwait Oil Company deducted 25 percent of oil revenues in the past two fiscal year.

Further discussion of legislative-executive relationship needed

MP Abdullah Al-Roumi has asserted that there should be discussion of the relationship between the executive and legislative branches of government, particularly after the recent crisis between the two. He said there must be an end to the occurrence of such crises and an avoidance of further escalations, emphasizing that such problems should not occur at the expense of the National Assembly's authority.

Al-Roumi told members of the legislative branch to pay attention to timing and political events when using their constitutional tools, cautioning them not to use such tools to pressure the government or for political manipulation. The MP alleged that the government had contributed to damaging the government's and parliament's supervisory reputation through using their positions to exert political pressure or for political manipulation.

Doctors: Kuwait's health system good with some loopholes

In the early hours of the morning, most Polyclinics in Kuwait are packed with patients, all waiting for an answer to their health concerns. And the only people who could help them are the doctors.

Medical care may stand on the shoulder of nurses, but doctors provide the care and carry the burden of any flaw in the health system. Those who answer the questions, diagnose the problem and try their best to relieve any pain, think the problem sometimes lies in miscommunication.

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New batch of graduating police cadets includes non-Kuwaitis

The Kuwait Police Academy recently held a graduation ceremony for its 70th batch of cadets. For the first time in its history, the graduating class included non-Kuwaiti graduates. The non-Kuwaiti graduates are citizens of GCC countries who have Kuwaiti mothers. The ceremony was held yesterday at Saad Al-Abdullah Academy for Security Sciences under the auspices of Interior Ministry Undersecretary Lt Gen Ahmad Al-Rujaib.

No democracy without free press

There cannot be a democracy without a free press, explained MP Saleh Al-Mulla. The Kuwait Journalists Association (KJA) organized a seminar, on Sunday, titled 'The responsibility of the Media in Protecting the Society from the Implications of Conflicts and Crises.' Key speakers included former Minister of Information Dr. Anas Al-Rashid, author Zayed Al-Zaid, and MP Saleh Al-Mulla.

The media holds a great responsibility to the public, Al-Mullah stated in a speech at the seminar, adding that this is the case especially when facing crises and this can only happen through transparency. In addition, he praised the local press and its role in revealing the facts of cases such as the fourth refinery and the Dow chemical partnership.

Investment sector hardest hit

The household of Hani, a Syrian expat working for a Kuwait-based investment company and a father of two, has experienced the effects of the global economic crisis firsthand. Though he has worked from 7am to 3pm for four years, he now needs to find an additional source of income. In his words, after he pays his rent and installments he has to get by until his next pay check with the meager sum of KD 20. Hani, 31, is among a growing number of employees in Kuwait's private sector that are facing reductions in salary. His employer, a large investment company, has been hit hard by the financial crisis and the collapse of share prices in the bourse.

Verdict on false news case

Kuwait's Criminal Court has adjourned a state security case filed by the Ministry of Defense against Faisal Al-Maymouni, a candidate in last year's parliamentary elections, who was accused of spreading false news and rumors concerning the local security situation. The charge, according to the Public Prosecution Department (PPD), could undermine the state's sovereignty, reported Al-Qabas. The suspect was most notably accused of spreading rumors concerning the collective resignation of middle-ranking army commanders in protest at delays in their promotions. "Such rumors could have spread sectarian concepts amongst Kuwaitis regarding this critical institution, Kuwait Army," said one security official, adding that the case had been adjourned in order for a verdict to be issued on January 29.

Al-Sabeeh protests budget cut

Nouriya Al-Sabeeh, the Education Minister protested against the Finance Ministry's decision to slash the budget of the Education Ministry by 30 percent during the new fiscal year. She asked the Ministry's Undersecretary Tamador Al-Sdairawi and Assistant Undersecretary for Financial Affairs Radhi Al-Rashidi to contact the Finance Ministry and urge officials to exclude the education portfolio from the decision.

Judges file new complaint

About 122 judges and court secretaries have made good on their threat to take His Highness the Premier Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammed Al-Sabah, along with Justice and Awqaf Minister Hussein Al-Huraiti, to court. In the second complaint filed by judges against the premier, they demanded the approval of financial allowances and salary increases for members of the judiciary. The complaint follows a previous one filed by 66 public prosecutors, which the court will consider on March 11. The judges' complaint contests the constitutionality of the cabinet's decision not to approve the judicial allowances, which they argue violates Article 50 of the constitution.

Cop detained for insulting Amir

Public Prosecutor Hamed Al-Othman has reportedly ordered the detention of a policeman for 21 days for investigations over accusations that he insulted His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah. The suspect allegedly called a telecom company while he was drunk and started calling His Highness the Amir names. Despite denying all the charges, the policeman was detained for further investigations, reported Al-Qabas.

Agility unworried about Iraq pullout

A possible US withdrawal from Iraq would not have a major impact on Kuwaiti logistics firm Agility because most of its contracts are commercial, its chairman said in remarks published yesterday. Tarek Sultan told Al-Rai newspaper that "government contracts, which include the deals with the US army, do not exceed $1 billion, in comparison with the $5 billion of the firm's commercial sector activity".

Kuwait plans more major projects

The country will see many large-scale projects, like the establishment of industrial zones and labor and urban developments, low-cost housing units on Al-Salmi Road, and the new towns of Al-Mutlaa, Ayem, and Subiya, said the Minister of Public Works and Minister of State for Municipality Affairs on.

Al-Huraiti accused of double standard

A parliamentary official from the Salafists Alliance warned Hussein Al-Huraiti, Minister of Justice Awqaf and Islamic Affairs against adopting double standard measures at the Ministry of Awqaf. The official said that everyone should be given equal chances and urged the minister not to favor certain people at the expense of others regardless of their tribal or electoral allegiances, reported Al-Rai.

Foreign Labor

Filipino workers' deployment continues despite global crisis

Despite the global economic slowdown, the Philippines is expected to deploy around 20,000 or even more workers to Kuwait in 2009," revealed the Philippine Ambassador to Kuwait Ricardo Endaya at the start of a two-day jobs fair which opened yesterday at the Movenpick Hotel in Shuwaikh Free Trade Zone. The jobs fair organized by the Asean Culture Network (ACN) was graced yesterday by Endaya and the Philippines' Labor Attach頴 Kuwait Josephus Jimenez. Dozens of recruitment agencies from Manila and Kuwait are taking part in the event, along with a number of remittance companies.

MoE plans to recruit 3,000 expat teachers

Ministry of Education (MoE) committees entrusted with recruiting expatriate teachers will shortly begin their activities recruiting teachers abroad to help cover the shortage of teachers in Kuwait's schools. It is expected that the committees will sign contracts with expat teachers from April onwards, recruiting them primarily in Egypt, Syria, Tunis and Jordan.

A MoE official said that the ministry will sign contracts with 3,000 teachers in all subjects, with a special emphasis on subjects where the ministry is currently suffering from a severe shortage of qualified teachers, such as English, French, Maths and computer skills, as well as other science subjects such as Physics, Chemistry and Biology. The official said that the greatest demand is for female teachers because the ministry is suffering a severe shortage of women teachers due to the women's circumstances, maternity leave, etc, with the current reserve teachers unable to make up the shortage.

Kuwait Summit

'Kuwait summit met Arab aspirations'

Madhi Al-Khamees, Secretary General of the Arab Media Forum, recently praised the outcomes of the Arab Economic, Social and Development Summit hosted in Kuwait last week and said the results met the aspirations of the Arab people. In statements to KUNA, he said Kuwait and His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah

will be remembered for playing a great role in reconciliation and bolstering unity among Arab leaders.

The summit and Gaza

Speaking at Kuwait Times' weekly diwaniya, political analyst and advisor to the Kuwait Journalist Association Dr Ayed Al-Manna shares his views on the recent Arab Economic Summit held in Kuwait and the political implications of Israel's war on Gaza.

European Commission welcomes Kuwait summit resolutions

The European Commission yesterday welcomed resolutions made during the recent Arab Economic, Development and Social Summit in Kuwait.

The European Union (EU) supports economic and political integration in all world regions, particularly in Arab countries, said Christian Homan, spokeswoman for European Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighborhood Policy Benita Ferrero-Waldner.

BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

SOUTH EAST ASIA

Tatheer Zahra Sherazi

Monitoring Report

From 23January to 30January

Presentation February 4, 2009

- Indonesia

Political Front

- Indonesian President, VP compete to lure voters
- Mining in mind, Mongolia's president to visit Indonesia (economic)
- AUSTRALIA: Complicit in East Timor Occupation
- Indonesian gov't sets 3 requirements on investment in steel industry

Economic Front

- Indonesia unveils final stimulus plan to boost economy

Social Front

- Another Indonesian lawmaker jailed for graft
- Indonesia: Christian party criticises Muslim edict
- Foreign, local Muslim religious leaders start summit in QC today
- Trapped Indonesian worker to return from Gaza on Tuesday

- Malaysia

Political Front

Strategic Front

- Canada & Malaysia. Bombardier delivers 415MP amphibious aircraft to Coast Guard

Economic Front

- China Gives Greenlight To M'sian Pharmaceutical Products
- Spike in dengue cases could hit Malaysian economy

Social Front

- Ministry's fund for Palestinians
- Malaysia seeks return of 2 citizens in Guantánamo

- Philippine

Political Front

- WWII-era bombs found in US Embassy compound in the Philippine capital
- Senate tackles baselines bill
- Ex-Philippine leader's grandson sets eyes on presidency

Economic Front

Social Front

- Japan to provide food aid to Philippines
- Adoption Of 267 Filipino Children By Florida's Gabriel German Underway
- Pig farmer infected with Ebola virus
- Up to 300,000 locals could lose jobs–Labor chief

- Philippine official meets Red Cross kidnap victims
- Muslim rebels attack villages in Philippines, two wounded

- Thailand

Political Front

- Thai gov't passes bill to stop airport blockades
- Pulo Willing To Talk To Thai Government
- Thailand offers to host regional meeting on stateless Rohingyas
- Thai minister to discuss temple dispute in Cambodia
- PM Abhisit believes Thais will come to accept tax reforms
- Thai minister: Arresting rebel leaders gives hope to detain more insurgents

- Excellent jump start for Thai-Cambodian relations

Economic Front

- Thailand's Largest Telecom Provider Selects 3Com Advanced Networking Solutions to Connect 30,000 Government Employees
- Japan's ambassador to Thailand calls for political stability

- Ex-PM criticizes Thai government's economic policy

Social Front

- Thailand PM to propose guidelines on refugee issue
- Tailand Detains More Muslim Migrants, Invites UN to Talks
- Thai anti-gov't protestors threaten to blockade Gov't House on Saturday

- Thai PM calls in top forensic scientist to investigate treatment of Rohingya
- Over 2,000 Thai workers loss jobs in January

- Singapore

Political Front

- New Singapore ambassador to Vietnam appointed

Economic Front

- Singapore Airlines says will reduce all-business flights
- Production firms welcome S$230m Media Fusion Fund to develop industry
- PM Lee says to assess impact of Budget before considering further measures

Social Front

- S'pore and Myanmar Red Cross sign agreement on Cyclone Nargis relief

Environmental Front

- PM Lee urges S'poreans to pull together to weather crisis
- Basic wages expected to rise by 1.5% this year

- Vietnam

Political Front

- Bulgaria, Vietnam celebrate 59 years if diplomatic partnership
- Bulgarian President looks to further ties with Vietnam
- New Singapore ambassador to Vietnam appointed

Economic Front

- Vietnam to supply rare minerals / Deal will create joint venture to mine elements essential for high-tech industry
- Italy Contributes EUR 3 Million to SME Cluster Development in Vietnam

Social Front

- Army Officer Rallied Troops In Vietnam At Great Risk

- Laos

Political Front

- Thai PM arrives in Laos
- Lao and Thai Prime Ministers talks in Vientiane
- EU gives 1.6 million Euros for good governance
- Laos to host ASEAN Environment Year 2009
- PM leaves for Kuwait
- KOICA gives US$ 10 million to Laos

Economic Front

- Laos to produce two million tons of cement by 2012
- Gold customers in Laos are retrenching
- PM receives new World Bank’s director for South East-Asia countries
- Thai Government finances Beungkhayong Indoor Stadium

construction (eco,socio,pol)

Social Front

- Vice President rallies people on 60th anniversary of Army
- Indian National Day in Laos

- Cambodia

Political Front

- Cambodia Thailand agree on more talks on border dispute
- U Win Shein appointed as Ambassador to Cambodia
- Vice president of German parliament to visit Cambodia
- Ke Kim Yan uncertain of future plans

Economic Front

- Business survey set for completion in March: government
- New fibre-optic cable will connect Cambodia to China

Social Front

- Cambodia tribunal dispute runs deeper
- Hundreds left homeless in Cambodia after forced eviction

Summary

This week the situation prevailing in this region was with some positive changes because most of countries heads are near to complete their tenure so new elections in different countries are drawing nearer. In this regard

At political front THAILAND and Cambodia agreed to more talks to resolve a dispute over a stretch of land at their border near the 900-year-old Preah Vihear temple that spilled over into fighting last year. Now After a year of border tension and political frustration, Cambodia has a new sense of confidence in Thailand

While Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva of the Kingdom of Thailand arrived in Vientiane on Friday morning

A Christian political leader has criticized a religious edict or fatwa issued by Indonesia's top Islamic body stating that only a Muslim could become president of the country.

At economic front China has agreed to facilitate an easy entry of Malaysian medical and pharmaceutical products, Health Minister Datuk Liow Tiong Lai. Singapore' Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said the idea behind crafting this year' budget is to have one that deals directly with the economic issues that confront Singapore, instead of having smaller measures every few months.

While at social front Japan will provide an emergency food aid amounting to 9.5 million USD to the thousands of war-displaced persons in the southern Philippine region of Mindanao**.** Over 150 poor urban families were forcibly evicted from central Phnom Penh in Cambodia at the weekend.

Summary of news items is as below:

• Indonesia

Political Front

- **Indonesian President, VP compete to lure voters**

Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Vice President Jusuf Kalla have stepped up visits to regions across the country, a move many criticise as an attempt to win over voters ahead of elections.

- **Mining in mind, Mongolia's president to visit Indonesia (economic)**

Mongolian President Nambaryn Enkhbayar is scheduled to make an official visit to Indonesia between February 8 and 11, in an effort to enhance economic ties between the two countries.

- **AUSTRALIA: Complicit in East Timor Occupation**

Recently declassified government records from 1978 are a further indictment of Australia's complicity in Indonesia's 24-year occupation of East Timor.

- **Indonesian gov't sets 3 requirements on investment in steel industry**

Indonesian Industry Minister FahmiIdris required steel investors in the country that they should have efficient technology applications, their production should be based in South Kalimantan, and they have to launch joint venture with local companies.

Economic Front

- **Indonesia unveils final stimulus plan to boost economy**

After giving conflicting figures, the government has finally set the stimulus at Rp 71.3 trillion (US$6.31 billion) to boost the economy amid the threat of crisis.

Social Front

- **Another Indonesian lawmaker jailed for graft**

An Indonesian court on Wednesday sentenced a legislator from the party of Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to four-a-half years in prison for accepting bribes. The anti-corruption court in Jakarta found Sarjan Taher, a lawmaker from the Democratic Party, guilty of accepting 5 billion rupiah (440,000 dollars) in bribe money from a provincial government.

- **Indonesia: Christian party criticises Muslim edict**

A Christian political leader has criticised a religious edict or fatwa issued by Indonesia's top Islamic body stating that only a Muslim could become president of the country. Sonny Wuisan, leader of the Christian Democratic Party (PKD) told Adnkronos International (AKI) that the edict from the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) was unconstitutional and should be withdrawn.

- **Foreign, local Muslim religious leaders start summit in QC today**

Amid the turmoil still gripping parts of the Islamic world, about 217 local and foreign Muslim religious leaders, including top officials of the 80-million member Nadhlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah of Indonesia, have converged in the Philippines to address issues on unity, peace, governance, and electoral reforms, among others.

- **Trapped Indonesian worker to return from Gaza on Tuesday**

Indonesian worker Umi Saodah, who has been trapped since fighting broke out in late December in the Gaza Strip, Palestine, will touch down in Jakarta on Tuesday afternoon, a Foreign Ministry official said Monday.

• Malaysia

Political Front

Strategic Front

- **Canada & Malaysia. Bombardier delivers 415MP amphibious aircraft to Coast Guard**

Bombardier Aerospace has announced that Malaysia's coast guard agency, the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA), has taken delivery of the first of two Bombardier 415MP amphibious aircraft ordered by the Malaysian government in June 2008. The Malaysian government is the launch customer in Asia for the specialized Bombardier 415MP aircraft.

Economic Front

- **China Gives Greenlight To M'sian Pharmaceutical Products**

China has agreed to facilitate an easy entry of Malaysian medical and pharmaceutical products, Health Minister Datuk Liow Tiong Lai said today.

- **Spike in dengue cases could hit Malaysian economy**

Malaysia's health minister says the doubling of dengue fever cases could hit the country's economy with 4,221 cases and 12 deaths in the first three weeks of the year, reports said Sunday.

Social Front

- **Ministry's fund for Palestinians**

THE Education Ministry has set up a Palestinian Humanitarian Fund in conjunction with its "One Malaysia, One Voice" campaign.

- **Malaysia seeks return of 2 citizens in Guantánamo**

Malaysia offered Saturday to take back two citizens who are prominent terrorism suspects at the Guantánamo Bay prison after President Barack Obama ordered the closure of the facility.

• Philippine

Political Front

- **WWII-era bombs found in US Embassy compound in the Philippine capital**

Construction workers accidentally unearthed about 100 bombs from World War II in the U.S. Embassy compound in the Philippine capital, but the explosives posed no immediate danger, police said Saturday.

- **Senate tackles baselines bill**

Sen. Miriam Defensor Santiago starts today her sponsorship of the bill defining the baselines of the Philippine archipelago that excludes the contested Kalayaan Island Group and the Scarborough Shoal.

- **Ex-Philippine leader's grandson sets eyes on presidency**

A former investment banker-turned-politician and one of Manila's most eligible bachelors has set his eyes on the Philippines' presidency, attempting to follow in the footsteps of his namesake grandfather in the 2010 elections.

Economic Front

Social Front

- **Japan to provide food aid to Philippines**

Japan will provide an emergency food aid amounting to 9.5 million USD to the thousands of war-displaced persons in the southern Philippine region of Mindanao, Japan's embassy in Manila said.

- **Adoption Of 267 Filipino Children By Florida's Gabriel German Underway**

Prompted by the sight of children from the Philippines starving in the streets, German set up Kong Mahal Orphanage to house his "King Kong"-sized family.

After over a year of operating a small orphanage in the Philippines, Gabriel German from Orlando has decided to look into another opportunity - at adopting 267 children.

- **Pig farmer infected with Ebola virus**

Health officials in the Philippines confirmed last week that a worker at a pig farm has contracted the Ebola Reston subtype of Ebola virus.

- **Up to 300,000 locals could lose jobs–Labor chief**

Up to 300,000 people could lose their jobs in the Philippines over the next six months as the global financial crisis deepens, Labor Secretary Marianito Roque warned on Wednesday.

- **Philippine official meets Red Cross kidnap victims**

A Philippine official failed to secure the release of three kidnapped Red Cross workers whom she met Wednesday in a southern stronghold of al-Qaida-linked militants.Provincial Vice Gov. Lady Ann Sahidulla, who also heads the Red Cross

in the region, said the workers were "fine and in good health" after they were snatched from their car at gunpoint on Jan. 15.

- **Muslim rebels attack villages in Philippines, two wounded**

Muslim rebels attacked two villages in a southern Philippine province, wounding two civilians, a regional military spokesman said Wednesday. Lieutenant Colonel Julieto Ando said Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) rebels first attacked Lower Dado village in Alamada town in North Cotabato province, 960 kilometres south of Manila, wounding a 19-year-old woman. Ando said the rebels were driven back by army troopers stationed in the village.

• Thailand

Political Front

- **Thai gov't passes bill to stop airport blockades**

Thailand's cabinet has approved a bill that it hopes will prevent another blockade of Suvarnabhumi Airport, following last November's protests in Bangkok (see: **Thai airport siege cost US$8.3 billion**).

- **Pulo Willing To Talk To Thai Government**

The Patani United Liberation Organisation (Pulo), one of the main separatist groups in restive southern Thailand, has welcome the Thai government's new policy on the three border provinces, and signalled its willingness to hold talks.

- **Thailand offers to host regional meeting on stateless Rohingyas**

has offered to host a meeting of working-level officials from other countries in the region to tackle problems regarding the Rohingya boat people, the foreign ministry said yesterday (January 23).

- **Thai minister to discuss temple dispute in Cambodia**

Thailand's new foreign minister will travel to Cambodia on Sunday for his first official visit, with both neighbours hoping to make progress on resolving a sporadically violent territorial dispute.

- **PM Abhisit believes Thais will come to accept tax reforms**

Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva said the kingdom's economy is likely to contract in the first quarter of this year, but he added that the government will try to maintain growth.

- **Thai minister: Arresting rebel leaders gives hope to detain more insurgents**

Arresting some rebel leaders gave authorities fresh hope of detaining more insurgents and rooting out separatist networks in the unrest South, Thai media quoted Defense Minister Prawit Wongsuwan as saying.

- **Excellent jump start for Thai-Cambodian relations**

After a year of border tension and political frustration, Cambodia has a new sense of confidence in Thailand

It is difficult to describe the current relationship between Thailand and Cambodia without taking into consideration the positive body language of representatives of the two countries, as well as other nitty-gritty details, on display during the two-day visit to Phnom Penh by Thailand's Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya over the weekend.

Economic Front

- **Thailand's Largest Telecom Provider Selects 3Com Advanced Networking Solutions to Connect 30,000 Government Employees**

3Com Corporation (Nasdaq: COMS), today announced that TOT, Thailand's largest telecommunications company, has chosen 3Com solutions to provide the network communications infrastructure at the Bangkok Government Center, a brand new mega-project of the Thai government. 3Com has been awarded a major part of the 323 million

- **Japan's ambassador to Thailand calls for political stability**

Japanese ambassador to Thailand H.E. Mr. Kyoji Komachi Thursday urged the Thai government to ensure the domestic political stability which was crucial for economic recovery.

- **Ex-PM criticizes Thai government's economic policy**

Ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra criticized the new Thai government Sunday for exploiting populist policies recently introduced as part of a $3.3 billion stimulus package to shore up the economy.

Social Front

- **Thailand PM to propose guidelines on refugee issue**

Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva Tuesday proposed the formation of a regional forum for dealing with illegal immigration following allegations the Thai Army mistreated a group of refugees.

- **Tailand Detains More Muslim Migrants, Invites UN to Talks**

Thailand arrested 78 Muslim migrants in a fishing boat off its southern coast and took them into police custody as it seeks to quell allegations previous detainees died after they were pushed out to sea.

- **Thai anti-gov't protestors threaten to blockade Gov't House on Saturday**

Thai anti-government protestors said on Tuesday that they would siege the Government House on Saturday.

- **Thai PM calls in top forensic scientist to investigate treatment of Rohingya**

Jan 29, 2009 Thailand's most celebrated forensic scientist inspected the army's former detention camp for Rohingya boatpeople on the island of Koh Sai Daeng yesterday on what she said was a mission to gather "evidence" at the direct request of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva. **...**

- **Over 2,000 Thai workers loss jobs in January**

As many as 2,863 Thai workers have reportedly lost their job in January this year and the country's higher number of unemployed is expected, according to the Thai Ministry of Labor Wednesday.

• Singapore

Political Front

- **New Singapore ambassador to Vietnam appointed**

The Singapore government has appointed Simon Wong Wie Kuen as the country's new ambassador to Vietnam. The appointment will take effect on February 9.

Economic Front

- **Singapore Airlines says will reduce all-business flights**

Singapore Airlines is reducing its all-business class service to New York and Los Angeles in the face of the global economic downturn, the carrier said on Wednesday.

- **Production firms welcome S$230m Media Fusion Fund to develop industry**

Production companies in Singapore have welcomed the government's proposed S$230 million Media Fusion Fund announced in this year's Budget. The money is aimed at helping local enterprises build up a world-class media talent base.

- **PM Lee says to assess impact of Budget before considering further measures**

Singapore' Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said the idea behind crafting this year' budget is to have one that deals directly with the economic issues that confront Singapore, instead of having smaller measures every few months.

Social Front

- **S'pore and Myanmar Red Cross sign agreement on Cyclone Nargis relief**

The Singapore Red Cross signed an agreement on January 22 with its Myanmar counterpart to provide humanitarian aid to victims of Cyclone Nargis.

Environmental Front

- **PM Lee urges S'poreans to pull together to weather crisis**

The Year of the Ox will be a challenging one for Singapore - with growth expected to be negative for the whole year.

- **Basic wages expected to rise by 1.5% this year**

Amid the economic gloom, the latest survey by the Singapore Human Resource Institute (SHRI) shows basic wages will rise by 1.5 per cent this year.

• Vietnam

Political Front

- **Bulgaria, Vietnam celebrate 59 years if diplomatic partnership**

Vietnam's embassy to Bulgaria marks 59 years since the establishment of diplomatic relations between Vietnam and Bulgaria at a ceremony attended by diplomats, members of the parliament and public figures, the **Vietnam News Agency (VNA)** reports.

- **Bulgarian President looks to further ties with Vietnam**

Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov will pay an official visit to Vietnam from January 29-31, making him the first State-level foreign guest to the country on the first days of its traditional new year.

- **New Singapore ambassador to Vietnam appointed**

The Singapore government has appointed Simon Wong Wie Kuen as the country's new ambassador to Vietnam. The appointment will take effect on February 9.

Economic Front

- **Vietnam to supply rare minerals / Deal will create joint venture to mine elements essential for high-tech industry**

The Vietnamese government says it will ensure a stable supply of rare earth minerals to Japan, which are needed for manufacturing high-tech products, The Yomiuri Shimbun has learned.

- **Italy Contributes EUR 3 Million to SME Cluster Development in Vietnam**

The Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) of Vietnam, the Embassy of Italy, and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) signed a technical assistance project entitled "SME Cluster Development".

Social Front

- **Army Officer Rallied Troops In Vietnam At Great Risk**

Ronald Scott Taylor, 64, a highly decorated Vietnam War veteran who became a lawyer in the Justice Department's criminal division, died Jan. 18 at the Department of Veterans Affairs nursing home in Washington.

• Laos

Political Front

- **Thai PM arrives in Laos**

Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva of the Kingdom of Thailand arrived in Vientiane on Friday morning, starting a one day state visit to the Lao PDR as the invitation of Prime Minister Bouasone Bouphavanh.

- **Lao and Thai Prime Ministers talks in Vientiane**

The high-level Government delegation of the Lao PDR and of the Kingdom of Thailand, on 23 January afternoon, held talks here.

- **EU gives 1.6 million Euros for good governance**

European Union (EU) is providing 1.6 million Euro for the programme on good governance and to strengthen the rule of law in Laos,The agreement on this was signed by the Lao government and Delegation of European Commission, at the Ministry of Planning and Investment in Vientiane on 26 January 2009.

- **Laos to host ASEAN Environment Year 2009**

Laos will be the host of ASEAN Environment Year 2009 in March and the host province will be Champassak.

- **PM leaves for Kuwait**

(KPL) A high ranking delegation of Laos led by Prime Minister Bouasone Bouphavanh left here yesterday for a three day first official working visit to the State of Kuwait at the invitation of Prime Minister Shelkh Nasser Al-Mohmmed Al-Ahmmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah of the Kuwait.

- **KOICA gives US$ 10 million to Laos**

Korea International Co-operation Agency (KOICA) has increased aid to Laos for its long term development plans from US$ 8.2 million in 2008 to US$ 10 million for 2009 but on the condition that bilateral co-operative plans between both nations are on an even keel.

Economic Front

- **Laos to produce two million tons of cement by 2012**

Efforts are being made to produce more cement so that by 2011 Laos would be producing one and a half million tons annually and this should be able to meet the demand for all the small and mega projects in the country.

- **Gold customers in Laos are retrenching**

The jewelry shops in Talat Sao or Morning Market in Vientiane were not selling their wares like hot cakes during the present Vietnamese Tet and Chinese Lunar New Year season because many gold customers had already retrenched or were out of town.

- **PM receives new World Bank's director for South East-Asia countries**

Mr. Bouasone Bouphavanh, Prime Minister of the Lao PDR received at his office in Vientiane last week a courtesy visit of Ms. Annette Dixon, the new World Bank's Director for the countries of South - East Asia.

- **Thai Government finances Beungkhayong Indoor Stadium**

construction (eco,socio,pol)

The Thai Government has supported more than 20 billion kip (85 million Thai baht) to the Lao Government for constructing an indoor stadium for the 25th South East Asian Games to be organised at this year end in Vientiane.

Social Front

- **Vice President rallies people on 60th anniversary of Army**

Vice President Bounnhang Vorachit and thousands of people were at a rally to mark the 60th anniversary of Lao People's Army at KM 5 Stadium in Savannakhet province, on 23 January.

Indian National Day in Laos

Indian Ambassador to Laos Mr Suresh Kumar Goel held a reception to mark the 60th anniversary of Indian Republic day on 26 January at Don Chan Palace Hotel. Foreign Minister Thongloun Sisoulith other ministers of the Lao cabinet, diplomats stationed in Laos and representatives of international organizations in Laos were some of the guests.

• Cambodia

Political Front

- **Cambodia Thailand agree on more talks on border dispute**

THAILAND and Cambodia agreed yesterday to more talks to resolve a dispute over a stretch of land at their border near the 900-year-old Preah Vihear temple that spilled over into fighting last year.

- **U Win Shein appointed as Ambassador to Cambodia**

The Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council of the Union of Myanmar has appointed U Win Shein as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Union of Myanmar to the Kingdom of Cambodia.

- **Vice president of German parliament to visit Cambodia**

Wolfgang Thierse, Vice President of the German Parliament, will officially visit Cambodia from Jan. 31 to Feb. 4 to beef up the friendly bilateral relations, said an official press release here Thursday.

- **Ke Kim Yan uncertain of future plans**

GENERAL Ke Kim Yan, former commander-in-chief of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces, is uncertain of the future following his unceremonious removal from the post last week.

Economic Front

- **Business survey set for completion in March: government**

First nationwide business survey in five years to be conducted from February to March as government secures funding from Japan.

- **New fibre-optic cable will connect Cambodia to China**

A USD18 million infrastructure project is set to connect Cambodia to China's Yunnan Province in April 2009 through a new high speed fibre-optic cable.

Social Front

- **Cambodia tribunal dispute runs deeper**

At first glance it seems to be simply a numbers game: whether to try 5, 10 or more defendants for the deaths of an estimated 1.7 million people at the hands of the Khmer Rouge three decades ago.

- **Hundreds left homeless in Cambodia after forced eviction**

Over 150 poor urban families were forcibly evicted from central Phnom Penh in Cambodia at the weekend.

Detailed Monitoring Report

• Indonesia

Political Front

- **Indonesian President, VP compete to lure voters**

Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Vice President Jusuf Kalla have stepped up visits to regions across the country, a move many criticise as an attempt to win over voters ahead of elections.

Yudhoyono and Kalla, each escorted by a different group of Cabinet ministers and officials, left Jakarta Wednesday (January 21) and Thursday (January 22) respectively to visit various regions across the country, leaving Jakarta void of leadership and prompting questions about the urgency of their travels.

With scores of Cabinet ministers using their working visits as a cover for campaigning both personally and for their parties across the archipelago, intensified regional visits by Yudhoyono and Kalla have been slammed as unnecessary and indirectly condoning improper campaign activities by ministers, many of whom have postponed their respective ministry's development programmes.

Despite a planned government decree calling for ministers contesting the legislative election to resign from office while campaigning, recent actions taken by the nation's top leaders have led election observers to call the decree nothing more than lip service. After opening a special economic zone in Batam, Riau province, Yudhoyono went to Sorong and Manokwari in West Papua to speak with victims of the recent earthquake. While there, he handed over around 150 billion rupiah (US$14 million) to the people under the guise of the National Programme for People's Empowerment (PNPM). The President and First Lady Any Yudhoyono smiled upon hearing the speech, with PNPM being one of Yudhoyono's key programmes since it was first launched 2007.

Aside from PNPM funds, the President also handed over billions in aid funding and soft loans to Papuan victims of the quake. Before 12,000 students from the Lirboyo Islamic School in Kediri, East Java, Kalla said the government was not making enough of a distinction between Islamic schools and public schools as far as budget allocation was concerned. Lirboyo clerics welcomed Kalla, saying the Islamic school opened its door to Golkar party. Afterwards Kalla, accompanied by party officials, addressed hundreds of supporters, the majority of them farmers, and promised to keep the price of rice high enough so they would not suffer.

- **Mining in mind, Mongolia's president to visit Indonesia (economic)**

Mongolian President Nambaryn Enkhbayar is scheduled to make an official visit to Indonesia between February 8 and 11, in an effort to enhance economic ties between the two countries.

He added that Mongolia, a country rich in mineral resources, was especially interested in learning how Indonesia managed its mineral mining.President Enkhbayar is slated to be accompanied by dozens of Mongolian business leaders seeking to explore cooperation in trade and mining between the two states.

Indonesia and Mongolia had previously signed a memorandum of understanding when then President Megawati Soekarnoputri visited Ulan Bator, the Mongolian capital city, in 2003.

- **AUSTRALIA: Complicit in East Timor Occupation**

Recently declassified government records from 1978 are a further indictment of Australia's complicity in Indonesia's 24-year occupation of East Timor.

"I think it was a case, and we've had plenty of them in our history, of a high level of moral blindness on the part of all of us. In the community, in parliament, in government, in opposition. It's not a lone case," former Australian government minister, Fred Chaney, told the Australian Broadcasting Commission upon release of cabinet records showing that Australia bowed to pressure from Indonesia and oil companies keen to extract the Timor Sea's resources.

The 1978 cabinet records show the machinations behind Australia's change in policy to recognise East Timor, occupied from 1975, as part of Indonesia for the first time.

Consisting of senior ministers, cabinet is the key decision-making body of the Australian government. Its records are made available to the public after 30 years, although some material remains off limits "to protect Australia's defence, security or international relations", according to the National Archives of Australia, which released the records on Jan.1.
The archives demonstrate the Malcolm Fraser-led government's willingness to ignore East Timorese rights and public sentiment in Australia. In 2005, East Timor's Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation estimated that the conflict-related death toll among Timorese during the 25-year occupation was as high as 183,000.

Thirty years ago, a "gap" - subsequently known as the Timor Gap - still existed in Australia's seabed boundary adjacent to East Timor. Despite ratifying bilateral agreements with Indonesia in 1973, the Timor Gap resulted from Australia's refusal to accede to the insistence of East Timor's colonial ruler, Portugal, that the seabed boundary between Australia and its colony be placed midway between the two.

Australia's hard-nosed approach to getting the maximum reward from resources in the Timor Sea is evident in one of the agreements with Indonesia.

In 1972, Australia negotiated with its northern neighbour that the boundary be established two-thirds of the way towards the Indonesian territory of West Timor, after Canberra successfully argued that it be based upon the Timor Trough - a deep underwater trench which runs parallel to Timor - which Australia insisted marked the division between two continental shelves. The full-scale1975 Indonesian invasion of East Timor - colonial administrators left East Timor after the 1974 Carnation Revolution in Portugal - which followed the discovery of major oil and gas fields in the Timor Sea a year earlier, meant that Portugal was no longer an effective impediment to closing the Timor Gap.

Although Australian governments publicly opposed the way in which East Timor was annexed by Indonesia, the 1978 records are not the first to demonstrate Australian acquiescence in the brutal occupation. Secret cables from 1974, released in 2000, show that Gough Whitlam, then Australia's prime minister, was supportive of an Indonesian takeover yet keen for the East Timorese to decide their own fate, albeit for the sake of appearance. Australian public opinion was on the side of East Timor, especially since Australian soldiers battling the Japanese in Timor during the Second World War had received considerable support from the locals, but also because of the deaths of five Australian-based journalists at the hands of Indonesian forces in the East Timorese town of Balibo almost two months prior to the invasion. And as the 1978 Cabinet records attest, Peacock was similarly wary of public views when he outlined his approach for conducting negotiations with Indonesia on closing the Timor Gap. Despite privately acknowledging Portugal's continuing claim to sovereignty over East Timor, Peacock told Cabinet that "the fact remains that Indonesia is clearly the only government which is in a position both to conclude and to enforce an agreement with us" on a seabed boundary in the Timor Gap. His submission also reveals that the Australian government was under pressure at the time to conclude delimitation in the area.The foreign minister suggested quick action on the part of Australia so as to avoid "a further irritant in the Australian-Indonesian relationship."

A subsequent submission to Cabinet by Peacock in December highlighted Australia's declining standing in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia, who viewed Australia as "a selfish, introverted nation oblivious to the consequences of the region's dynamic, externally oriented process of economic growth".

- **Indonesian gov't sets 3 requirements on investment in steel industry**

Indonesian Industry Minister FahmiIdris required steel investors in the country that they should have efficient technology applications, their production should be based in South Kalimantan, and they have to launch joint venture with local companies.

The Indonesian Business daily on Wednesday quoted the Ministry's Director General for Textile Machinery and Miscellany Ansari Bukhari as saying that the requirements are targeting the rapid growing of foreign investors in the industry.

Indonesia has an abundant resources of ion ores that are supplied for many steel manufacturer in the country. Thus, many transnational steel producers were very keen on investing in and establishing steel manufacturers in the country, such as Pohang Steel Co. (Posco) with a total investment up to 1 billion U.S. dollar and ArcelorMittal with a total investment up to 800 million dollars.

Economic Front

- **Indonesia unveils final stimulus plan to boost economy**

After giving conflicting figures, the government has finally set the stimulus at Rp 71.3 trillion (US$6.31 billion) to boost the economy amid the threat of crisis.

The package will include the Rp 27.5 trillion stimulus previously announced, and is higher than the figure of Rp 50 trillion touted by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

The new stimulus revolves around tax savings worth Rp 43 trillion, waived taxes and import duties for businesses and certain households, worth Rp 13.3 trillion, as well as subsidies and govern-ment spending of Rp 15 trillion for businesses. Speaking before the House of Representatives' Commission XI, which oversees financial affairs, Finance Minister Sri Mulyani Indrawati said the stimulus was aimed at increasing people's purchasing power, the competitiveness and sturdiness of businesses facing the economic

According to the ministry, Indonesia's Rp 71.3 trillion stimulus package accounts for 1.4 per cent of the country's GDP, higher than the recently announced US stimulus, percentage-wise, which only accounts for 1.2 per cent of the GDP. The government forecasts the economy to grow between 4.5 and 5.5 per cent this year, a drop from an estimated 6.2 per cent in 2008.

The global downturn is affecting Indonesia's economy on all fronts, from weakening demand for exports and slowing down flows of investment, to reducing consumer purchasing power.

Businesses have long warned that massive layoffs could hit Indonesia when the impact of the global crisis hits home the hardest some time in the middle of this year. To achieve 5 per cent economic growth, the government will boost spending by 10.4 per cent from a year earlier, as private consumption, the economy's main driver, looks likely to drop this year. Fauzi Ichsan, an economist with Standard Chartered Bank, said that in the past four years, government spending was relatively low.

Social Front

- **Another Indonesian lawmaker jailed for graft**

An Indonesian court on Wednesday sentenced a legislator from the party of Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to four-a-half years in prison for accepting bribes. The anti-corruption court in Jakarta found Sarjan Taher, a lawmaker from the Democratic Party, guilty of accepting 5 billion rupiah (440,000 dollars) in bribe money from a provincial government.

The money was intended to influence lawmakers to approve a project to convert a mangrove forest into a seaport in South Sumatra province, the court said.

Judges also ordered him to pay a fine of 200 million rupiah.

Indonesia ranks as one of the world's most corrupt countries.

Over the past year, the country's powerful Corruption Eradication Commission has arrested several high-profile figures, including a top prosecutor, businessmen and legislators. Since President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono won Indonesia's first direct presidential election in 2004, officials ranging from governors to former ministers have been jailed on graft charges. A former Bank Indonesia deputy governor, Aulia Pohan, whose daughter is married to Yudhoyono's son, is due to go on trial on Friday for his alleged involvement in a 100-billion-rupiah embezzlement case that has embroiled the central bank

- **Indonesia: Christian party criticises Muslim edict**

A Christian political leader has criticised a religious edict or fatwa issued by Indonesia's top Islamic body stating that only a Muslim could become president of the country. Sonny Wuisan, leader of the Christian Democratic Party (PKD) told Adnkronos International (AKI) that the edict from the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) was unconstitutional and should be withdrawn.

The PKD is a very small Indonesian political party that in particular attracts Indonesians who are ethnic Chinese.

The Indonesian Ulema Council issued several fatwas or edicts including a ban on practising yoga, smoking and voting abstention during its conference in the West Sumatran town of Padangpanjang at the weekend.

The council said that Muslims should vote at forthcoming presidential elections in July if the candidates have certain characteristics such as "being Muslim".On the other hand some 700 clerics from the council agreed on Sunday that Muslims were forbidden to

Abstain from voting in elections if “qualified” candidates existed. Although the country has the largest number of Muslims in the world, Indonesia has substantial Christian, Buddhist and Hindu minorities. The country's constitution recognises five religions and allows all its citizens to run for public office. At the same time of the six presidents that have been elected since independence, all were Muslims and all the candidates running in the forthcoming elections are Muslim.

The fatwas have no legal power but devout Muslims adhere to the rulings because ignoring a fatwa is considered a sin.Indonesia has a population of 235 million people and 90 percent of them are Muslim. Most practise a moderate form of the faith

- **Foreign, local Muslim religious leaders start summit in QC today**

Amid the turmoil still gripping parts of the Islamic world, about 217 local and foreign Muslim religious leaders, including top officials of the 80-million member Nadhlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah of Indonesia, have converged in the Philippines to address issues on unity, peace, governance, and electoral reforms, among others.

Indonesian, Australian, and Philippine Muslim religious leaders will be holding starting today in Quezon City the Second National Ulama Summit of the Philippines organized by the Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy (PCID).

The Jan. 26-30 event is the culmination of the PCID-managed three-year "Empowering the Ulama of the Philippines Project," which is funded by the United Kingdom and the Netherlands through their embassies here.Former human rights commissioner lawyer Nasser Marohomsalic said local Muslims are very thankful to the two embassies for funding the project, which he said can go a long way in helping give voice to Muslim religious leaders.Marohomsalic, one of the convenors of PCID, with Amina Rasul as lead convenor, said the Ulama project could not have taken off if not for the R30 million or so funding from the two embassies, without specifying how much did each give.Top-notch speakers lined up for the event include Dr. Endang Turmudi, secretary general of Nadhlatul Ulama; Dr. Anwar Abbas, chairman of Entrepreneurship and Economic Council of Muhammadiyah, which counts on 30 million members; Prof. Dr. Abdullah Saeed, a professor of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Melbourne in Australia, Dr. Hisham A. Hellyer, principal research fellow, International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies, Ambassador Alistair MacDonald, head of delegation of the European Commission to the Philippines; Foreign Affairs Undersecretary Rafael Seguis, chairman of the government peace panel in the peace process with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front; and former President Fidel V. Ramos.

A highlight of the summit is the finalization of the formation of a firstever national association of ulama in the Philippines to give them stronger voice in the affairs of Muslim Filipinos vis-a-vis issues confronting their communities.

For three days, over 200 Filipino ulama will discuss the Mindanao peace process, governance and electoral reforms in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, economic development and poverty alleviation, da'wah (Islamic propagation), human rights and women's rights among other topics at the Imperial Palace Suites in Quezon City.

- **Trapped Indonesian worker to return from Gaza on Tuesday**

Indonesian worker Umi Saodah, who has been trapped since fighting broke out in late December in the Gaza Strip, Palestine, will touch down in Jakarta on Tuesday afternoon, a Foreign Ministry official said Monday.

According to official data, Saodah had left for Palestine eight years ago with the help of a company called PT Andro Meda Jakarta.Saodah, originally from Central Java, had, however, initially worked in Jordan as a domestic helper before moving to work in Palestine. The latest information the ministry has received about her was that she had been detained for questioning at a local police station because of a dispute she had with her employersShe was detained not long before the Israeli military operation started on Dec. 27.

• Malaysia

Political Front

Strategic Front

- **Canada & Malaysia. Bombardier delivers 415MP amphibious aircraft to Coast Guard**

Bombardier Aerospace has announced that Malaysia's coast guard agency, the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA), has taken delivery of the first of two Bombardier 415MP amphibious aircraft ordered by the Malaysian government in June 2008. The Malaysian government is the launch customer in Asia for the specialized Bombardier 415MP aircraft.

Present at an official ceremony held in Subang Jaya, Malaysia, was Datuk Seri Najib, Honourable Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia; Datuk Amdan, Director General, MMEA; and Mr. Michel Bourgeois, President, Specialized and Amphibious Aircraft, Bombardier Aerospace.

A variant of the rugged Bombardier 415 amphibious aircraft - the only aircraft specifically designed for aerial firefighting – the Bombardier 415MP amphibious aircraft will be modified for maritime surveillance capabilities to meet the specialized needs of the MMEA. The first Bombardier 415MP aircraft delivered to Malaysia will be equipped with a state-of-the-art surveillance suite that includes two side-looking airborne radars, one forward-looking infrared radar, an airborne maritime surveillance system and other avionics and communications equipment.

"Bombardier Aerospace is proud to deliver its first Bombardier 415MP aircraft to Malaysia. We are confident this hardworking aircraft, with its multi-purpose capabilities, will prove a worthy tool in Malaysia's efforts to patrol its extensive waterways and to enhance its search and rescue missions," said Michel Bourgeois, President, Specialized and Amphibious Aircraft, Bombardier Aerospace. "The aircraft's ability to fly at low speed and low altitude with great maneuverability, and to execute direct interventions on water, makes it an ideal aircraft for coastal patrol missions. It is a very capable and cost-effective aircraft, able to carry out a multitude of specialized missions that previously required dedicated vessels and aircraft."

The multi-purpose Bombardier 415MP aircraft can be used in a variety of specialized missions such as search and rescue, environmental protection, coastal patrol and transportation. It is fitted with sophisticated sensors to locate and identify vessels, people in distress and pollutants.

Since delivery of the first Bombardier 415 aircraft in 1994, Bombardier Aerospace has delivered 69 Bombardier 415 aircraft, including three Bombardier 415MP aircraft, to Croatia, France, Greece, Italy, Ontario, Quebec and Spain, with 42 aircraft in operation in the Mediterranean region alone.

Economic Front

- **China Gives Greenlight To M'sian Pharmaceutical Products**

China has agreed to facilitate an easy entry of Malaysian medical and pharmaceutical products, Health Minister Datuk Liow Tiong Lai said today.

He said that both countries had also agreed to set up a special secretariat to identify such products.Since 1991, he said, the ministry had approved over 200,000 medicines and health products but none had penetrated the Chinese market because of the strict procedure and clinical testing required by their authorities. About 2,000 Chinese products, meanwhile, were already in the Malaysian market, he told reporters after the Chinese New Year open house hosted by Penang MCA here.

Following a bilateral negotiation recently, Liow said, China had agreed to give a green light to Malaysian products already approved by the ministry without too much bureaucracy and second testing.With this, the local pharmaceutical industry could expand their market to China, he said.

- **Spike in dengue cases could hit Malaysian economy**

Malaysia's health minister says the doubling of dengue fever cases could hit the country's economy with 4,221 cases and 12 deaths in the first three weeks of the year, reports said

Sunday.

Liow Tong Lai told the Star daily there were only 2,223 people infected by the mosquito-borne virus and five deaths for the same period last year.
Liow said many of the cases occurred in the capital Kuala Lumpur, which recorded 409 cases and two deaths in the first three weeks of the year compared to 270 cases for the same period last year.

Officials said the high number of cases was attributed to an increase in mosquito breeding grounds such as abandoned housing projects and even occupied homes. Dengue fever is endemic in Southeast Asia with Malaysia seeing cases surge since 2003. Last year there were 49,335 cases in Malaysia with 112 deaths, compared to 48,846 cases with 98 deaths the previous year.

Social Front

- **Ministry's fund for Palestinians**

THE Education Ministry has set up a Palestinian Humanitarian Fund in conjunction with its "One Malaysia, One Voice" campaign.

Education director-general Datuk Alimuddin Mohd Dom said the education community has been encouraged to make a donation.He said cash donations were preferred as it would be difficult to send other items.

As part of the "One Malaysia, One Voice" campaign to be held until Feb 20, Alimuddin said schools had been encouraged to organise various programmes and activities to raise awareness among students on freedom and peace.Students in private and international schools would also participate, he added.Alimuddin said students would also be encouraged to write to their counterparts in Palestine, adding that these letters would then be sent to them through Wisma Putra.He said the ministry did not want students who might have witnessed the news reports of attacks in Gaza to have a negative impression.Education deputy director-general (General Education Operations) Datuk Noor Rezan Bapoo Hashim said the ministry would work with media organisations to highlight the best letters while outstanding essays would be put on the "One Malaysia, One Voice" website at
The public can make donations to the Palestinian Humanitarian Fund in the form of cheques payable to MESCA Treasurer, to the Secretariat of the Palestinian Humanitarian Fund, Public School Management Division, Education Ministry, Third and Fourth Floors, Block E2, Parcel E, 62604 Putrajaya (For attention: Assistant Principal Director (Policy Sector)).

They can also bank in their contributions at the MESCA account at Public Bank under the account number 3077068628.Education Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Tun Hussein is expected to hand over all donations to a representative of the Palestinian government in Malaysia.

- **Malaysia seeks return of 2 citizens in Guantánamo**

Malaysia offered Saturday to take back two citizens who are prominent terrorism suspects at the Guantánamo Bay prison after President Barack Obama ordered the closure of the facility.

Prime Minister Ahmad Ahmad Badawi said the Malaysian government is seeking permission for its police officers to meet the two men for the first time since their transfer in September 2006 from secret CIA prisons to the U.S. Navy base at Guantánamo Bay for trials.

"If possible, we'd like to bring both of them home" so that they can be held in Malaysian custody if necessary, Malaysia's national news agency, Bernama, quoted Abdullah as telling reporters during a visit to Dubai.

An estimated 245 men are being held at the U.S. Navy base in Cuba, most of whom have been detained for years without being charged with a crime. Among the issues the Obama administration has to resolve is where to put those detainees -- whether back in their home countries or at other federal detention centers.The two Malaysians -- Mohd Farik Bin Amin, better known as Zubair, and Mohammed Nazir Bin Lep, also known as Lillie -- are so-called high-value detainees at Guantánamo.

They were captured separately in Thailand in 2003 and have undergone U.S. military hearings to affirm their status as "enemy combatants" eligible for military trials.Mohd Farik allegedly helped the Southeast Asian terror network Jemaah Islamiyah's operational planner case targets for potential attacks. He is believed to have been tapped to be a suicide operative for an al Qaeda attack on Los Angeles.

Mohammed Nazir allegedly helped transfer funds from al Qaeda to Jemaah Islamiyah, some of which was used for operational expenses in a 2003 car bombing at the J.W. Marriott hotel in Jakarta, Indonesia that killed 12 people.Abdullah on Saturday lauded Obama's decision to shut the Guantánamo facility within a year, saying Malaysia ``is happy because he has fulfilled his promise."

It was not immediately clear if Abdullah's comments indicated that Malaysian authorities might detain Mohd Farik and Mohammed Nazir under a law that allows for indefinite detention without trial of people regarded as security threats. Aides traveling with Abdullah and Foreign Ministry officials could not immediately be contacted

• Philippine

Political Front

- **WWII-era bombs found in US Embassy compound in the Philippine capital**

Construction workers accidentally unearthed about 100 bombs from World War II in the U.S. Embassy compound in the Philippine capital, but the explosives posed no immediate danger, police said Saturday.

The heavily corroded mortar bombs and artillery shells will be taken to an aerial bombing range in the northern Philippines for disposal, police Senior Superintendent Pablo Francisco Balagtas said.It was not immediately clear if the ordnance was American or Japanese, Balatagas said.

U.S. Embassy spokeswoman Rebecca Thompson said workers found the bombs Friday as they were digging the foundations for new visa and veterans' facilities at the seaside embassy. Workers and staff were immediately evacuated as a safety precaution while the police bomb squad removed the explosives, Thompson said.Normal embassy operations resumed Saturday, she said.

Manila was the scene of heavy fighting between U.S. and Japanese forces during the liberation of the Philippines in 1945, and war-era explosives are often found in the city.

- Senate tackles baselines bill

Sen. Miriam Defensor Santiago starts today her sponsorship of the bill defining the baselines of the Philippine archipelago that excludes the contested Kalayaan Island Group and the Scarborough Shoal.

Senate President Juan Ponce Enrile said the bill was second only to the newly passed 2009 budget in the Senate's list of priority measures. The Philippines will lose its claim to its 200-mile exclusive economic zone and to the continental shelf of up to 350 nautical miles if it could not delineate its archipelagic baselines. The seas beyond its territorial waters will then be considered as international waters over which the Philippines will have no jurisdiction.

Santiago said she is prepared to answer questions on the constitutionality of the bill. She argued that excluding Kalayaan from the bill actually works to the advantage of the Philippines. Kalayaan and Scarborough Shoal are part of the disputed Spratly Islands, a group of 100 islands, reefs and islets. The Spratlys are claimed in part or in whole by the Philippines, China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan Santiago had been on sick leave since late November because of chronic fatigue syndrome. Before her ailment,

though, she had expressed confidence that the Senate would pass the measure in December.

Intense debate seen

Senate Majority Leader Juan Miguel Zubiri predicted that there would be intense debates on the baselines bill. But he added that that it would be eventually approved, "just like the Japan-Philippine Economic Partnership Agreement" that underwent protracted debates before being ratified. At least 14 of the 23 senators have already endorsed the baselines bill. Santiago said that in case her ailment would prevent her from fully defending the bill on the floor, Senate Minority Leader Aquilino Pimentel Jr. would take over the sponsorship. Pimentel had initially opposed the bill, but gave it its full backing after Santiago accepted his amendment that he said would protect the Philippine claim to Kalayaan.

Power reform

Meanwhile, Enrile said the Senate would pursue the amendment of the Electric Power Industry Reform Act (EPIRA) even if the House has shelved its counterpart measure. Enrile said the amendment of the act is a personal advocacy and it did not matter to him that the House no longer has a counterpart bill. A bill needs the approval of both the House and the Senate to become a law.

Pampanga Rep. Mikey Arroyo, chairman of the House Committee on Energy, shelved the bill amending the act, because industry players had already agreed to accelerate the implementation of open access, thus rendering the proposed revisions to the law moot and academic. Pimentel said one of the act's provisions that must be repealed is that on systems loss. He also wants to prevent power distributors from passing on to consumers the cost of power used in their offices.

Enrile said the Senate would also include among its priority bills the P11.3-billion supplementary budget for the automation of the 2010 presidential election. He said the Senate would act speedily on the supplementary budget, once the House transmits it. Under the Constitution, all appropriations measures should emanate from the House.

- **Ex-Philippine leader's grandson sets eyes on presidency**

A former investment banker-turned-politician and one of Manila's most eligible bachelors has set his eyes on the Philippines' presidency, attempting to follow in the footsteps of his namesake grandfather in the 2010 elections.
But senator Manuel 'Mar' Roxas III says he is aware that political and social pedigree

will not be enough to propel him to the country's highest office. Opinion polls show him somewhere in the middle of a pack of about half a dozen potential presidents. Although elections are about 16 months away, many politicians in the Philippines are readying their campaigns. Along with Roxas, Vice-President Manuel 'Noli' de Castro and senators Manuel Villar and Loren Legarda are also likely to be in the fray.
A former assistant vice president at New York-based Allen and Company Inc, Roxas said he believes he has the ability to attack the pervasive corruption in the country, repair its tattered law and order apparatus and prepare for the impact of the global financial crisis. Roxas has been a member of the House of Representatives and trade secretary in two administrations. He shrugged off his poor ratings in surveys, dismissing them as "irrelevant" and insisted his small, cohesive Liberal Party was capable of helping him win elections in May 2010. Roxas entered politics earlier than planned in the early 1990s when his younger brother, Gerardo Jr, a congressman, died of a rare type of liver cancer. He returned to the Philippines to carry on the family's political tradition, taking his brother's seat. Roxas's father was a former congressman and later senator. He was planning to run for president in the 1970s but his plans were aborted when martial law was imposed by the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos.
Many in the Philippines believe supporters of current President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo will try to amend the constitution to do away with a law that does not allow her to remain in the presidency after 2010.

Economic Front

Social Front

- **Japan to provide food aid to Philippines**

Japan will provide an emergency food aid amounting to 9.5 million USD to the thousands of war-displaced persons in the southern Philippine region of Mindanao, Japan's embassy in Manila said.

The assistance will cover the distribution of 7,500 metric tonnes of rice to affected civilians through the United Nations' World Food Program (WFP).

Japan hopes that this emergency food aid through the WFP would help mitigating the current humanitarian crisis in Mindanao and strongly expects a cease-fire and the immediate resumption of peace talks between the government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the embassy was quoted by news agencies as saying in a statement.

Earlier in 2006, Japan had provided food aid amounting to 280 million Japanese yen (approximately 2.8 million USD) for the displaced in the conflict-affected areas in Mindanao also through the WFP.

- **Adoption Of 267 Filipino Children By Florida's Gabriel German Underway**

Prompted by the sight of children from the Philippines starving in the streets, German set up Kong Mahal Orphanage to house his "King Kong"-sized family.

After over a year of operating a small orphanage in the Philippines, Gabriel German from Orlando has decided to look into another opportunity - at adopting 267 children.

"There will be many out there that will wonder how this man can afford to take care of so many children. I looked at this not as a problem but as an opportunity. If I didn't, who would? That would be a tragedy," said German, a non-denominational minister and an international business and spiritual consultant to CEOs.

With the Filipino Peso hovering around 50 pesos to the U.S. dollar, it makes it easy to step up and help. "Not only it is easy to help out, but I wanted to give the kids a sense of being grounded, for once in their lives. Most of the kids have moved many times within a year-period, from one orphanage to another; sometimes the move is more than a hundred miles. I wanted the kids to have a sense of a real family with a mother and a father they can look up to for anything that may come their way - a duo that they can truly trust and rely on."

- **Pig farmer infected with Ebola virus**

Health officials in the Philippines confirmed last week that a worker at a pig farm has contracted the Ebola Reston subtype of Ebola virus.

The virus was found in pigs at two farms on Luzon, the largest island in the Philippines, last year (see Nature **457,** 364–365; 2009). Fifty workers at those farms were subsequently tested for antibodies to the virus, and one has tested positive. World Health Organization officials estimate that he contracted the virus between 6 and 18 months ago, although it has not been proved that he caught it from a pig.

Direct transmission from pigs to humans would be a cause for concern because pigs are thought to act as 'mixing vessels', where viruses can mutate into more virulent forms with a greater impact on human health.

- **Up to 300,000 locals could lose jobs–Labor chief**

Up to 300,000 people could lose their jobs in the Philippines over the next six months as the global financial crisis deepens, Labor Secretary Marianito Roque warned on Wednesday.

Some 15,000 had been laid off over the past two months while 19,000 others had their workweek cut to four days or less, he told reporters.

Roque said that a “worst-case scenario” would see the number of jobless rise to between 250,000 and 300,000 by the end of June.

He described the job cuts so far, which include more than 10,000 in the Calabarzon industrial belt south of Manila, as being within the “manageable level” in relation to a nationwide workforce of about 37 million. Calabarzon took its name from the provinces of Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal and Quezon.

North of Manila at the Subic Bay Metropolitan Authority (SBMA), operations of about 20 companies and more than 4,000 employees there have been affected by the crisis since late last year, according to official data.

Two companies have folded up—Harbour Yacht Trading Services Corp. in December last year and Cacho Hermanos this month. Air 2100 Inc. is expected to shut down in February. A total of 84 employees would lose their jobs from these closures.

Four other companies would be retrenching a total of 530 workers soon. Chan Soong International Subic Inc. would lay off 32 employees in February; In Young Philippines Inc. would cut two jobs; Subic Power Corp. would retrench a total of 76 workers—71 in February and five more in April; and Winstron Infocomm Philippines Corp. will cut 420 jobs also in February.

Several other companies have been enforcing or would soon implement forced leaves for their workers: Ichiban Import-Export Corp., Jeannie’s Touch, Limech Garments Manufacturing Corp., Nakayama Precision, Nidec, Phil Inter Electronics Corp., Powerlane Resources Inc., Sanritsu Technology Subic Inc., Sanyo Denki, Subic Bay Apparel Corp., Subic Bay Satellite Systems Inc. and Taian Subic Electric.

Some of these companies already imposed leaves among their employees as early as March 2008, while others would do so in the first two months of 2009. A total of 4,281 workers would be made to go on forced leaves.

Bataan layoffs

Also north of Manila at the Bataan Economic Zone, the Japanese company Mitsumi Philippines also on Wednesday announced that it had laid off 134 workers whose contracts expired on December 31, 2008 and compressed work days from six to five days a week of 3,314 employees because of declining orders for its products. It cited the global economic crisis.

Noble Metals, a 100-percent Filipino firm engaged in metal plating, has served notice of a two-month temporary shutdown effective February 20, 2009 that will affect 32 workers. Mitsumi and Noble are two of the 42 multinational companies operating at the economic zone located in Mariveles town. The 42 companies have a total workforce of 14,426.

William Verzon, Mitsumi Phils personnel manager, denied reports that the company producing electronics components had just laid off 2,400 workers. Mitsumi began operating in Mariveles in 1980. Unemployment in the Philippines currently stands at 6.8 percent.

The government is holding talks with employers' groups to ease the fallout from the global economic downturn, which has heavily hit the country's two top export earners, electronics and garments, where most jobs have gone so far. Manila, according to Roque, has asked business groups to prepare measures to mitigate the impact on their workers and use job cuts only as a last resort.

Job creation is seen as tough in the Philippines, where some 27 million people live on a dollar a day or less and where one in three adults is unemployed or underemployed, according to official data. There is an unmet demand for 389,000 jobs abroad, including more than 100,000 in Qatar and 12,000 in Kuwait, Roque said.

Holcim upbeat

A leading cement manufacturer seemed to be looking at the bright side.

Holcim Ltd. also on Wednesday said it "has no plans to cease" operations of its plants in the Philippines, although there could be temporary shutdowns of production lines. Thackwray, however, said that there could be "short shutdowns" with supply already outpacing demand, even as he stressed none of the company's 1,500 local employees would be retrenched. Holcim Philippines, part of Switzerland-based Holcim Group, is the country's top cement manufacturer with four plants with total annual production capacity of 7.7 million tons.

The Philippines is to announce economic growth figures for 2008 on Thursday but it has said that Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth may come in at between 4.2 and 4.5 percent after a 30-year high of 7.2 percent in 2007. GDP is the total value of goods and services produced in a country in a year. It has reported massive job cuts in the key electronics and garments sectors since December as the global financial crisis softens demand for the export items.

- **Philippine official meets Red Cross kidnap victims**

MANILA, Philippines: A Philippine official failed to secure the release of three kidnapped Red Cross workers whom she met Wednesday in a southern stronghold of al-Qaida-linked militants.Provincial Vice Gov. Lady Ann Sahidulla, who also heads the Red Cross in the region, said the workers were "fine and in good health" after they were snatched from their car at gunpoint on Jan. 15.A photo of the meeting showed the three International Committee of the Red Cross workers from Switzerland, Italy and the Philippines standing with Sahidulla behind a tangle of coconut trees.Sahidulla's negotiating team failed to convince the kidnappers to release the captives without ransom and other conditions, Jolo Governor Sakur Tan said.

Tan, who heads a task force overseeing the hostage crisis, said authorities knew where the captives were being held but declined to divulge details of the government's strategy to secure their release.

Philippine Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro said last week the use of force was not an option "at this time" to free the hostages.The Red Cross said it had previously been in contact with the three by telephone, including a call Wednesday. "They continue to sound calm and composed and say they are doing all right," said Aeschlimann.

The three workers — Andreas Notter, 38, of Switzerland; Eugenio Vagni, 62 of Italy; and Mary Jean Lacaba, 37, of the Philippines — were in Jolo, a predominantly Muslim region, to inspect a water sanitation project at the provincial jail. They were offered security escorts but declined, citing their agency's neutrality, Tan said.The U.S. Embassy, meanwhile, warned Americans on Wednesday against traveling to the southern Philippines citing threats from kidnap gangs and terrorists. U.S. citizens were urged to take "extreme caution if traveling there," it said.

Kidnappers handed the three workers to Abu Sayyaf gunmen who have a stronghold in the dense jungles near Indanan township, Jolo provincial police chief Julasirim Kasim said. Abu Sayyaf is on a U.S. list of terrorist organizations because of its links to al-Qaida.

- **Muslim rebels attack villages in Philippines, two wounded**

Muslim rebels attacked two villages in a southern Philippine province, wounding two civilians, a regional military spokesman said Wednesday. Lieutenant Colonel Julieto Ando said Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) rebels first attacked Lower Dado village in Alamada town in North Cotabato province, 960 kilometres south of Manila, wounding a 19-year-old woman. Ando said the rebels were driven back by army troopers stationed in the village.

The rebels left behind three unexploded rocket-propelled grenades and one M203 rifle grenade recovered by government troops, he added. A few hours later, the rebels fired

two rounds of mortars in the nearby village of Teren Teren, which exploded at the public market and at the cemetery. A 13-year-old girl was wounded in the second attack, Ando said.Hostilities between the military and the MILF have been sporadic since August 2008, when the rebels launched a series of attacks in the southern region of Mindanao. The guerrillas were protesting the Supreme Court's decision to block the signing of a key agreement between the government and the MILF that would have expanded an existing Muslim autonomous region in Mindanao. More than 200 people were killed in the clashes, while more than 500,000 were displaced at the height of the fighting. The 12,000-strong MILF has been fighting for an independent Islamic state in Mindanao since 1978 but entered into peace negotiations with the government in 1997.

• Thailand

Political Front

- **Thai gov't passes bill to stop airport blockades**

Thailand's cabinet has approved a bill that it hopes will prevent another blockade of Suvarnabhumi Airport, following last November's protests in Bangkok (see: **Thai airport siege cost US$8.3 billion**).

Under the bill, Suvarnabhumi's staff will be able to make arrests, checkpoints will be set up, and drills aimed at preparing staff for a similar incident will be mandatory. No one has yet been arrested, charged or prosecuted over the blockade, and officials say an investigation into the incident is about 30% complete.
The government will send the bill to Thailand's top legal advisers in the Council of State, before it is sent to parliament for further approval.

- **Pulo Willing To Talk To Thai Government**

The Patani United Liberation Organisation (Pulo), one of the main separatist groups in restive southern Thailand, has welcome the Thai government's new policy on the three border provinces, and signalled its willingness to hold talks.

In a posting on Pulo's website, its Chief of Foreign Affairs, Kasturi Mahkota said the movement hoped the policy represents a genuine step towards reform and change in the region.
He said the Patani Malay Movement welcomed the new direction that could lay the foundations for a political settlement of the conflict.Kasturi, who is believed to be living in exile in Europe, said the movement was ready to come together and meet with representatives with a genuine mandate from the Thai Government, facilitated by an impartial third party, to begin discussions on a peaceful resolution of the conflict. More than 3,500 people have died in daily violence since January, 2004 when separatist groups resumed an armed campaign to seek independence for the Muslim-majority provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala which border Malaysia.There had been reports

of talks betwen several separatist groups and Thai government representative that took place in Geneva, Jeddah, Langkawi and Jakarta in the past few years, but nothing concrete came out as the Thai Government and the military had refused to hold direct talks.Prime Minister Abihist Vejjajiva, who visited Yala on Saturday, had said that the government would set up a new agency to address the problem, as well as investigate complaints of torture and human rights abuses by state agencies.

- **Thailand offers to host regional meeting on stateless Rohingyas**

has offered to host a meeting of working-level officials from other countries in the region to tackle problems regarding the Rohingya boat people, the foreign ministry said yesterday (January 23).

The Navy stands accused of pushing some 1,000 boat people back out to sea and then abandoning them with almost no food or water.The government denies the allegation and regards the rohingya as illegal migrants who were being smuggled into the Kingdom by a humantrafficking syndicate.

Stateless Rohingyas, a Muslim ethnic group, often travel by boat from Burma or Bangladesh to seek a better life in Southeast Asia. They prefer Muslim countries rather than predominantly Buddhist ones like Thailand.However, Thailand now houses some 20,000 Rohingya, said foreign ministry spokesman Tharit Charungvat.He called illegal migration a regional problem requiring internationalcooperation.Ambassadors at yesterday's meeting promised to convey the proposal to their governments and reply as soon as possible, he said.

- **Thai minister to discuss temple dispute in Cambodia**

Thailand's new foreign minister will travel to Cambodia on Sunday for his first official visit, with both neighbours hoping to make progress on resolving a sporadically violent territorial dispute.

A foreign ministry official said that Kasit Piromya would leave for Phnom Penh at 6:55pm (1155 GMT) and arrive back Monday evening, with the disputed land around Cambodia's Preah Vihear temple likely on the agenda.

A spokesman from Cambodia's foreign ministry told AFP on Thursday that officials including Kasit's counterpart, Hor Namhong, will urge the visiting minister to help broker a peaceful solution as soon as possible.Troops from Cambodia and Thailand clashed on October 15 on disputed land near the 11th century Preah Vihear temple, leaving four soldiers dead.The Cambodian-Thai border has never been fully demarcated, in part because it is littered with landmines left over from decades of war in Cambodia.Tensions flared in July when the cliff-top Khmer temple, which is in Cambodia, was awarded United Nations World Heritage status, rekindling the long-running disagreement.Troops from both sides have been stationed around the area since then, and negotiations aimed at reaching a solution stalled last year as Thailand was gripped by political turmoil which

brought down the previous government.New Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva named Kasit as foreign minister last month, but he has turned out to be a controversial choice.Kasit was a vocal supporter of protests which shuttered Bangkok's airports for a week in November and December, and the staunch nationalist also criticised the previous government's handling of the crisis with Cambodia.Kasit is due to meet Cambodian premier Hun Sen, King Norodom Sihamoni and other high-ranking officials.

- **PM Abhisit believes Thais will come to accept tax reforms**

Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva said the kingdom's economy is likely to contract in the first quarter of this year, but he added that the government will try to maintain growth.
To boost the economy, the government has announced a US$3 billion stimulus package and controversial tax reforms. In 2008, Thailand was already on a bumpy fiscal road due to prolonged political instability. The benchmark SET index had its worst year since 1997, losing 50 per cent of its value. The global financial crisis and sharp decline in exports worldwide, which account for 70 per cent of Thailand's GDP, also contributed to the economic downturn.

PM Abhisit, in an exclusive interview with Channel NewsAsia, said the government plans to introduce inheritance and property taxes, which are sure to be met with resistance.
He said: "You would expect opposition when you make some structural changes. But these are medium and longer term issues. They're not something we can immediately implement. It will take time before we come up with the draft law and get it through Parliament and implement it. Asked if he was prepared to stake his popularity on this particular issue, Mr Abhisit answered: "I think you know we have to do what needs to be done. And I always believe that if you can explain clearly to the people and that you are doing it for the good for public and not your own self interest, they will come to accept it." The Thai prime minister said he expects the Thai economy to turn around by the end of this year or early next year.

In the meantime, companies like Thai Airways said they would likely cut jobs and flights, while General Motors said it would shed 8 per cent of its Thai workforce.

- **Thai minister: Arresting rebel leaders gives hope to detain more insurgents**

Arresting some rebel leaders gave authorities fresh hope of detaining more insurgents and rooting out separatist networks in the unrest South, Thai media quoted Defense Minister Prawit Wongsuwan as saying.

During Thai security forces' counterinsurgency operation Mondayat an undisclosed location in the deep South, some rebel leaders were arrested, according to a report by the Bangkok Post's website Wednesday. Monday's operation netted leading figures of the Runda KumpulanKecil (RKK) insurgent group, whose members have infiltrated deep into Thailand's southernmost provinces, the website said. The success of the recent

counterinsurgency operation was the launch pad for similar arrests, the website quoted Gen. Prawit as saying.

The defense minister conceded that restoring peace in the strife-torn South would still be a tough task, the website said. The country's deep South comprises mainly the three southernmost provinces -- Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat, and some parts of Songkla province. Insurgent violence has killed over 3,500 people in the deep South since its resurrection in Jan. 2004.

- **Excellent jump start for Thai-Cambodian relations**

After a year of border tension and political frustration, Cambodia has a new sense of confidence in Thailand

It is difficult to describe the current relationship between Thailand and Cambodia without taking into consideration the positive body language of representatives of the two countries, as well as other nitty-gritty details, on display during the two-day visit to Phnom Penh by Thailand's Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya over the weekend.

The trip was successful because Foreign Minister Kasit managed to restore confidence among the Cambodian leadership, especially Prime Minister Hun Sen, in Prime Minister **Abhisit Vejjajiva** and his government. Over the past year, the lack of political stability in Thailand and the frequent changes of foreign minister and government have worried our Cambodian friends. But it seems now that the Cambodians are confident the new Thai administration is a partner they can deal with.

Hun Sen was also pleased with Abhisit's letter to him citing his statement in Oddar Meanchey that any bilateral problems between the two countries should be solved through peaceful means, negotiation and the non-use of force. Both Abhisit and Hun Sen see eye to eye on this. The Thai leader has reaffirmed that the border issues will be resolved through the existing bilateral mechanisms.

"As we are immediate neighbours and share a common border, traditions and cultures, my government is committed to bringing better security and more prosperity to the livelihood of our two peoples and countries," Abhisit said in part of his letter, and it was that kind of spirit that was displayed throughout the visit. Preparations are now underway for Abhisit to visit Cambodia.

Back in 1989, Kasit was part of the Thai delegation at the Paris Peace Conference, which Hun Sen also participated in. At their meeting over the weekend, the two vowed to work together again like they did twenty years ago to bring peace to Cambodia. But this time the stakes are higher because both countries are Asean members and they have an obligation to work for the benefit of the regional grouping. Thailand is ready to do that.

In the near future, the country is planning to release a grant of Bt1.8 billion for a highway construction project in Cambodia.

From 1986-2008, Thailand provided grants of Bt1.2 billion and soft loans totalling Bt2.2 billion to Cambodia for infrastructure development projects. Other assistance included technical cooperation and training in various fields. Despite the tension of the past year caused by border demarcation disputes at the Preah Vihear temple and other historic monuments, trade between the two countries amounted to US$1.8 billion (Bt63 billion) last year, up from US$1.4 billion in 2007.

In the near future, additional cultural and personal exchanges will increase, including between the two countries' legislators. For the first time, the **Democrat Party** will establish ties, and cooperate with, the ruling Cambodian People's Party.

Thai-Cambodian relations are now on firmer ground and the two sides are ready to move on. However, the Thai opposition parties and ill-intentioned individuals continue to use vitriol to undermine the friendship. So much so that Hun Sen has told the Thais that both sides have to avoid falling victim to misunderstanding and misinterpretation coming from sources such as unconfirmed reports from media or non-governmental organisations. Both countries have suffered recently from such rumour-mongering and even mud-slinging.

The recent calls from Singapore and Burma to boycott the upcoming Asean Summit in Thailand were a bit silly. The postponement of the Asean summit from last December has already damaged Thailand's international reputation and the grouping's interest. But at this point, all Asean members have confirmed their participation. They want to see a successful summit chaired by Thailand. They know that a strong and successful Asean that has agreed on economic and financial cooperative frameworks will be of benefit to all members, especially during this time of global economic crisis.

But make no mistake, Thai-Cambodian relations are pivotal within the Asean context. Hun Sen was right when he said the state of ties between the two countries could affect Asean as a whole. Cambodia is an active member in Asean initiatives, especially most recently in the drafting of the Asean charter and the terms of reference for the new Asean human rights body.

The border tensions last year even led to brief exchanges of gunfire between Thai and Cambodian troops, and naturally this caused great concern among the Asean members. After all, no member countries have ever gone to war with each other before. And this is a record and legacy the grouping wants to maintain. The Abhisit government knows that relations and mutual trust with Cambodia must be improved and solidified before the countries can go beyond the bilateral framework. At the same time, Thailand has emerged from a political abyss and is now moving towards a more stable political condition. However, time is still needed before this situation can be consolidated further.

Economic Front

- **Thailand's Largest Telecom Provider Selects 3Com Advanced Networking Solutions to Connect 30,000 Government Employees**

3Com Corporation (Nasdaq: COMS), today announced that TOT, Thailand's largest telecommunications company, has chosen 3Com solutions to provide the network communications infrastructure at the Bangkok Government Center, a brand new mega-project of the Thai government. 3Com has been awarded a major part of the 323 million Thai Baht (USD9.6 million) tender for the 40,000-port local area network (LAN) scheduled to be installed during the next few months, making it one of the largest networks of its kind in the region.

The project involves the extensive deployment of 3Com advanced network solutions including the 3Com®Switch 5500-EI family of stackable Gigabit switches and the Switch 9500 series of 10-Gigabit multi-service core routing switches. The TippingPoint® Intrusion Prevention System (IPS) and Network Access Control (NAC) solution are also being deployed along with an H3C® SecPath firewall system that integrates firewall, denial-of-service (DoS) protection, VPN and traffic-management capabilities.

- **Japan's ambassador to Thailand calls for political stability**

Japanese ambassador to Thailand H.E. Mr. Kyoji Komachi Thursday urged the Thai government to ensure the domestic political stability which was crucial for economic recovery.

Kyoji made the remarks Thursday while meeting with Thai minister to the Prime Minister's Office Virachai Virameteekul in the Government House. Amid the global economic downturn, the two sides had agreed to cooperate and would exchange economic information, according to a report by Thai television Channel 3. The Japanese ambassador told Virachai that Thailand has the advantage in attracting Japanese investors and tourists since Thai were friendly, Channel 3 said. However, the Japanese ambassador said that the domestic political stability was essential for the economic recovery, the report said. Each year, 1.3 million Japanese visit Thailand and Japanese firms are the largest investors in Thailand, with up to 7,000 firms having been established here. Thai Premier Abhisit Vejjajiva plans to visit Japan in early February to restore Japanese investors' confidence in Thailand following over three years of the country's political turmoil. The political problem was blamed by Japanese firms operating in Thailand as one among other negative factors which affected investments in Thailand.

- **Ex-PM criticizes Thai government's economic policy**

.Ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra criticized the new Thai government Sunday for exploiting populist policies recently introduced as part of a $3.3 billion stimulus package to shore up the economy.

Commenting on a series of projects designed for the country's rural poor, Thaksin said it was unclear if the plan by the government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva

would work.When Thaksin was in power from 2001-2006, he introduced populist policies including a universal health care scheme, village funds and education scholarships, which garnered his administration tremendous support from rural villagers.The social programs were severely criticized by Thaksin's opponents, including Abhisit's then opposition Democrat Party..Abhisit earlier this month introduced the stimulus package that includes an expansion of Thaksin's rural development schemes and rejuvenating a tourism industry battered by political turmoil.

Thaksin, self-exiled since he was overthrown in a 2006 military coup, said he was on an aircraft over international waters when he made the call. The interview was broadcast on a private satellite TV station right after Abhisit finished his weekly television address on state-run television.Thaksin's loyalists say they will continue to hold street protests in support of the former leader, who faces corruption charges should he return to Thailand. He lives mostly in Hong Kong and the Middle East.

Thailand's economic situation worsened late last year when protesters who opposed the pro-Thaksin government occupied the prime minister's offices for three months and besieged the airports for a week, stranding more than 250,000 travelers. The Bank of Thailand has estimated the country would lose 290 billion baht ($8.3 billion) as a result.

Social Front

- **Thailand PM to propose guidelines on refugee issue**

Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva Tuesday proposed the formation of a regional forum for dealing with illegal immigration following allegations the Thai Army mistreated a group of refugees.

Abhisit's suggestion came after the United Nations' refugee agency (UNHCR) expressed concern over the fate of 126 boat people from Myanmar who were detained in Thailand, as authorities refused to reveal their location. The UN refugee agency last week officially requested access to the group after reports that Thailand had abandoned up to 1,000 members of Myanmar's Muslim Rohingya minority out at sea in ill-equipped boats with scant supplies. The Thai Army has denied knowing the whereabouts of the 126 refugees, reportedly found at sea and brought ashore by the military.

Accusations of mistreatment surfaced earlier this month after nearly 650 Rohingya were rescued off India and Indonesia. Hundreds of the boat people are still believed to be missing at sea. Last week the permanent secretary of Thailand's Foreign Ministry, Virasakdi Futrakul, met ambassadors from Myanmar, India, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Malaysia for immigration talks and agreed to hold further discussions.

- **Tailand Detains More Muslim Migrants, Invites UN to Talks**

Thailand arrested 78 Muslim migrants in a fishing boat off its southern coast and took them into police custody as it seeks to quell allegations previous detainees died after they were pushed out to sea. Thailand is struggling to contain an outcry over its treatment of the Rohingya boat people after CNN published a photo showing its military towing them away from shore on Jan. 26. Five of six boats towed in late December sank, killing several hundred people, CNN reported, citing Iqbal Hussain, who was on the boat that landed safely.

The government is investigating the CNN report and anyone who has violated human rights "will be dealt with decidedly," Abhisit said. The navy chief has denied allegations that the boats were sent out without engines and adequate food and water. The 78 arrested today were taken into police custody and charged with attempting to illegally immigrate to Thailand, said Pol. Col. Veerasin Kwanseng of Ranong province, which borders Myanmar's southern tip. Some of the migrants were as young as 14, he said.

Regional Forum

Abhisit today asked the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to participate in a regional forum on how to respond to ethnic Rohingyas who flee their homeland.

Thailand has proposed talks with India, Malaysia, Indonesia, Bangladesh and Myanmar to find a long-term solution to the problem, Abhisit said. None of the countries have signed the UN's Refugee Convention, which defines refugee status and the rights of asylum seekers. The UNHCR said today Thailand hasn't formally explained what happened to 126 boat people who have reached its shores in the past few weeks. Still, the agency said it would participate in regional talks.

Refugee Access

The UNHCR first asked Thailand for access to the 126 detainees on Jan. 20. Thai fishermen were forced to rescue Rohingyas from a boat that was allegedly pushed out to sea by Thailand's military late last month, the UNHCR said.

Thousands of Myanmar's mostly Muslim Rohingyas flee the country each year because of land confiscation, arbitrary taxation, forced eviction and denial of citizenship, according to an Amnesty International report. Some members of the estimated population of 3 million also attempt to settle in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia and India.

Indonesia plans to deport 193 Bangladeshis and Rohingyas that landed on its westernmost island on Jan. 7, Teuku Faizasyah, a spokesman for its Foreign Ministry, said by phone. Indonesia has determined they are economic migrants, he said. Thailand has nine camps along its border with Myanmar that are home to 111,000 ethnic Karen and Karenni refugees who have fled the country over land. Thailand doesn't recognize any of the ethnic minorities as refugees.

Economic Disparity

Myanmar's per-capita spending power was $1,200 last year, according to a CIA estimate. Thailand's purchasing power parity, the exchange rate at which one nation's price level equals another country's, was about 7 times greater. Some 14,300 Rohingyas live as UN-recognized refugees in Malaysia, where 60 percent of the population is Muslim. In Bangladesh, which borders Myanmar's Rakhine state where many Rohingya originate, 28,000 live in UN camps and another 200,000 live in a stateless existence, according to the UNHCR.

- **Thai anti-gov't protestors threaten to blockade Gov't House on Saturday**

Thai anti-government protestors said on Tuesday that they would siege the Government House on Saturday.

Among their demands, they want the government to take prompt legal action against leaders of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) responsible for the closure of Bangkok's two airports in late last year, the website by The Nation newspaper reported on Tuesday.

Their threat has coincided with a planned mass rally by the Democratic Alliance Against Dictatorship (DAAD) at Sanam Luang in Bangkok on the same day. Jatuporn Prompan, opposition Puea Thai party member and DAAD core leader said last week that the DAAD-led protestors would gather at Sanam Luang and march to other locations.

- **Thai PM calls in top forensic scientist to investigate treatment of Rohingya**

Jan 29, 2009 Thailand's most celebrated forensic scientist inspected the army's former detention camp for Rohingya boatpeople on the island of Koh Sai Daeng yesterday on what she said was a mission to gather "evidence" at the direct request of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva. **...**

- **Over 2,000 Thai workers loss jobs in January**

As many as 2,863 Thai workers have reportedly lost their job in January this year and the country's higher number of unemployed is expected, according to the Thai Ministry of Labor Wednesday.

The 2,863 laid-off workers were the outcome of the closure of some 50 private firms, said director-general Amporn Nitisiri of the Department of Labor Protection and Welfare, the website by the Thai News Agency (TNA) reported.

Moreover, some other 102 companies, which had been affected by the global economic downturn, were also expected to lay off workers, the website said. These 102 companies have a combined workforce of 68,122, while it is expected that of this total number, some 23,296 workers are likely to be laid off and some other 44,826 might be asked to reduce working hours. Earlier, Thailand's National Statistical Office (NSP) reported that in

December of 2008 alone the country's unemployed rate edged up, to stand at about 540,000, or 0.6 percent higher year-on-year. Of this number, some 150,000 people were new graduates. The Thai cabinet on Wednesday agreed to extend the unemployment compensation period for laid-off workers from six months to eight months, the website quoted Deputy Government Spokesman Phutthipong Punnakan as saying. During the 1997 economic crisis, the Thai unemployment rate was 4.4 percent or up to 1.4 million.

• Singapore

Political Front

- **New Singapore ambassador to Vietnam appointed**

The Singapore government has appointed Simon Wong Wie Kuen as the country's new ambassador to Vietnam. The appointment will take effect on February 9.

According to a statement from Singapore's Foreign Affairs Ministry (MFA), Mr Wong joined the Singapore Foreign Service in 1990 and last served as MFA's director for Northeast Asia. The 43-year-old had previously also served in the Singapore embassies in Seoul and Beijing. Mr Wong graduated from the National University of Singapore with a Bachelor of Social Science honours degree in Sociology and received his Master of Arts degree in East Asian studies from Cornell University.

Economic Front

- **Singapore Airlines says will reduce all-business flights**

Singapore Airlines is reducing its all-business class service to New York and Los Angeles in the face of the global economic downturn, the carrier said on Wednesday.

The 14 weekly Airbus A345 flights will be cut to 10, Singapore Airlines (SIA) said, adding the change will initially take effect between February 17 and March 25.

The non-stop all-business service to New York began in May last year, followed by Los Angeles in August.

Earlier in January, SIA and travel agents said the carrier was cutting more than 200 flights to Europe, Australia, China, and India in response to falling passenger numbers amid the global slowdown.

The airline said its December passenger numbers were down 7.5 per cent year-on-year. Analysts have said the airline industry will be hit hard by the deepening global economic slump which has seen people cut back on discretionary spending such as leisure travel.

- **Production firms welcome S$230m Media Fusion Fund to develop industry**

Production companies in Singapore have welcomed the government's proposed S$230 million Media Fusion Fund announced in this year's Budget. The money is aimed at helping local enterprises build up a world-class media talent base.

Industry veteran Tony Chow believes the grants will go a long way in developing media innovation, but at the same time said the cash infusion will not turn Singapore into Asia's media hub overnight.

In this tough economic climate, Chow said production houses should use the S$230-million fund to build on the industry's capabilities. Among his wish list - developing talent, a critical component in the industry - and media research and development. Another emerging trend is content reaching outside its traditional boundaries. Chow said he believes that for Singapore media companies to grow, they must have the capability to create content and own the intellectual property rights. In the long term, he continued to say, the grant will help sustain the industry, but it is still talent development that will carry the industry forward. Details of the how the grant will be given have not been finalised but Chow said he expects most production companies to apply for it. The Media Development Authority will release details of the funding programme in the coming months.

- **PM Lee says to assess impact of Budget before considering further measures**

Singapore' Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said the idea behind crafting this year' budget is to have one that deals directly with the economic issues that confront Singapore, instead of having smaller measures every few months.

Mr Lee made the remark as he went about his rounds on the first day of the Lunar New Year to show his appreciation to workers who help keep essential industries going. This year, it was a visit to pharmaceutical firm GlaxoSmithKline. But with worries about the economy, the customary tossing of the "lo hei" for prosperity had an added ring of urgency this year.

Mr Lee was asked questions about off-Budget measures, such as what should happen if the global situation does not pick up.As for some reactions that the Budget was more for businesses than individuals, Mr Lee pointed out that there was quite a significant package for households, although some would have wished for more.

Going forward, PM Lee said he will keep an eye on how the American and European economies do over the next six to nine months, but cautioned layoffs may still be inevitable.
Job security remains an issue, especially after this Lunar New Year period. While GlaxoSmithKline itself has no plans for retrenchment this year, the chemical industries union said the sector is still facing issues with about 200-300 people having

been laid off in just January alone. GlaxoSmithKline, which opened in 1982, has invested S$1.4 billion to date - with another S$100 million to pumped in from now until 2013.

Social Front

- **S'pore and Myanmar Red Cross sign agreement on Cyclone Nargis relief**

The Singapore Red Cross signed an agreement on January 22 with its Myanmar counterpart to provide humanitarian aid to victims of Cyclone Nargis.

For a start, the collaboration will see three rural health centres and a cyclone shelter being built in three townships in the Irrawaddy delta. Money to do this will come from funds raised by the Singapore Red Cross. This latest development adds to other efforts the Singapore Red Cross has been making, as part of its cyclone relief work in Myanmar. The organisation had collaborated with various Singapore welfare organisations, as well as agencies in Myanmar, to provide assistance to victims in the immediate aftermath of the cyclone.

Projects completed included the rebuilding of a new village at Auk Pyun Wa, which include homes, a school, a clinic, a cyclone shelter, a school and an orphanage in Thanlyin. Projects underway include a cyclone shelter in Twantay, two schools, a cyclone shelter in Bogalay and another cyclone shelter in Kungyangone.

The Singapore Red Cross has received a total of S$11.6 million from members of the public and corporate sector for its Cyclone Nargis fund. Of this, almost S$9 million has been expended or committed. The Singapore Red Cross will continue to be the custodian of the fund and says it will assist victims of Cyclone Nargis, so long as the funding remains available.

Environmental Front

- **PM Lee urges S'poreans to pull together to weather crisis**

The Year of the Ox will be a challenging one for Singapore - with growth expected to be negative for the whole year.

But calling on Singaporeans not to be despondent, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, in his Lunar New Year message, said the country has the strengths to outlast this recession.

And for all the government is doing - as seen in the just unveiled S$20.5 billion Budget - Mr Lee also called on community and family to pull together to weather the crisis.

A recent OCBC survey found that the top three Singaporean dreams this year were starting a family, settling down, and buying a home.

In contrast, just last year, the top three dreams were seeing the world, self-improvement and making money. Mr Lee said this highlighted how priorities have shifted.

Calling the family the most important life raft in times of crisis, Mr Lee said this festive period is a time for togetherness, including extended families.

Community efforts are another important bedrock.With community organisations coming up with innovative ways to help residents, the government will also increase funding to such groups and increase tax deductions, as announced in the Budget.

Mr Lee also explained the need to dip into the country's reserves. Calling it a major, carefully-thought out decision, he said the money was built up patiently over the years so that in the event of a crisis, like this current financial meltdown, a vigorous response could be mounted. But he cautioned that when things returned to normal, the habit of putting something aside in the reserves whenever possible must resume, so that the next crisis can be met with confidence. While all these measures will help mitigate the downturn, Mr Lee said it cannot lift the economy from recession as this is a global problem.

He added that Singaporeans can expect growth to remain negative for more months and perhaps even the whole year. However, Mr Lee said Singapore's basic strengths of a stable society and good reputation can be built upon for the country to emerge stronger from this period.

- **Basic wages expected to rise by 1.5% this year**

Amid the economic gloom, the latest survey by the Singapore Human Resource Institute (SHRI) shows basic wages will rise by 1.5 per cent this year.

This is a sharp contrast to the 4.4 to 4.8 per cent rise last year. The survey of 208 companies shows that only three per cent plan to cut, or have cut wages this year, while 38 per cent of those surveyed will implement wage freezes. Variable bonuses will still be given out, and the public sector may see the biggest bonuses -- up to three months, or nearly twice the expected market average of 1.5 to 1.7 months.

Overall, SHRI says variable bonuses, excluding the Annual Wage Supplement, will average about 1.5 to 1.7 months, a drop from the 2.0 to 2.4 months seen in 2008.

It adds that this will result in a total wage decrease of two per cent for 2009, in sharp contrast to last year's increase of 6.8 per cent. And amid the uncertainty, the survey found that only 40 per cent of firms surveyed intend to hire this year, down from 63 per cent last year. Interestingly, seven per cent say they have retrenched or plan to retrench staff this year, compared to 10 per cent last year. As can be expected, more people are holding on to their jobs. The survey found that less than 18 per cent of companies experienced staff turnover as compared to 63 per cent last year. In terms of business prospects, two-thirds of those surveyed say they are satisfied with current prospects, compared to 91 per

cent since the last survey six months ago. Only four per cent are optimistic over the next six months, compared to 22 per cent previously.

• Vietnam

Political Front

- **Bulgaria, Vietnam celebrate 59 years if diplomatic partnership**

Vietnam's embassy to Bulgaria marks 59 years since the establishment of diplomatic relations between Vietnam and Bulgaria at a ceremony attended by diplomats, members of the parliament and public figures, the **Vietnam News Agency (VNA)** reports. At the meeting Georgi Pirinski, chairperson of the Bulgarian parliament, expressed his satisfaction with the stable development of the friendly and beneficial bilateral relations, adding that the upcoming visit of Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov to Vietnam is real manifestation of the perfect partnership between the two nations.

- **Bulgarian President looks to further ties with Vietnam**

Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov will pay an official visit to Vietnam from January 29-31, making him the first State-level foreign guest to the country on the first days of its traditional new year.

Georgi Parvanov will be the first Bulgarian head of state to visit Vietnam since 1979. He is scheduled to hold talks with State President Nguyen Minh Triet and meet with Party General Secretary Nong Duc Manh, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and National Assembly Chairman Nguyen Phu Trong.

The Bulgarian President is expected to discuss with Vietnamese leaders specific measures to further the two countries' traditional friendship and multi-faceted cooperation, especially in the fields of economics, trade, agriculture, education and labour, along with regional and international issues of mutual concern. Vietnam and Bulgaria established their diplomatic ties in February, 1950 and Bulgaria had since then given Vietnam both material and spiritual support in the latter's national liberation and defence cause.

Bilateral relations have been growing rapidly with the exchange of visits by high-ranking delegations.
Vietnam and Bulgaria 's trade relation remains limited, however, it is also growing fast. Bilateral trade turnover in 2006 more than doubled to 48 million USD from the previous

year's figure of 22 million USD and surged to 100 million USD in 2008. Vietnam exports to Bulgaria coal, coffee, rubber, seafood, foodstuff, bamboo products, pepper, cashew nuts, textile products and clothes and imported chemical products, medicines, wine, machines and shipping equipment.
By August 2008, Bulgaria had five investment projects in Vietnam with a total registered capital of nearly 12.9 million USD. Bulgaria currently ranks 56 th among 81 countries and territories investing in Vietnam.

- **New Singapore ambassador to Vietnam appointed**

The Singapore government has appointed Simon Wong Wie Kuen as the country's new ambassador to Vietnam. The appointment will take effect on February 9.

According to a statement from Singapore's Foreign Affairs Ministry (MFA), Mr Wong joined the Singapore Foreign Service in 1990 and last served as MFA's director for Northeast Asia. The 43-year-old had previously also served in the Singapore embassies in Seoul and Beijing.

Mr Wong graduated from the National University of Singapore with a Bachelor of Social Science honours degree in Sociology and received his Master of Arts degree in East Asian studies from Cornell University.

Economic Front

- **Vietnam to supply rare minerals / Deal will create joint venture to mine elements essential for high-tech industry**

The Vietnamese government says it will ensure a stable supply of rare earth minerals to Japan, which are needed for manufacturing high-tech products, The Yomiuri Shimbun has learned.

The trading companies Toyota Tsusho Corp. and Sojitz Corp., and a Vietnamese government-run resource development company will launch a joint venture to start developing a major earth mineral site in Vietnam in the next fiscal year. More than 90 percent of these rare minerals are imported from China. Japan hopes that obtaining Vietnam's cooperation will secure a more stable supply. The two countries plan to develop the Dong Pao deposits, about 280 kilometers northwest of Hanoi. The joint venture will begin commercial mining operations as early as 2011, supplying about 5,000 tons of the minerals, or about a quarter of Japan's annual consumption, for about 20 years.

Toyota Tsusho and Sojitz plan to acquire 49 percent of the deposit rights, but an Economy, Trade and Industry Ministry official said, "The majority of the unearthed minerals are highly likely to be exported to Japan." Rare earth minerals, such as the elements lanthanum, cerium and neodymium, are indispensable in the manufacture of permanent magnets for products such as hybrid vehicle motors and computer hard disks.

Demand for the minerals is expected to continue growing. At a meeting held in mid-January in Ha Long, Vietnam, Vietnamese government officials informed Senior Vice Economy, Trade and Industry Minister Takamori Yoshikawa that it would ensure that Japan received a stable supply of rare minerals.

The Japanese government plans to support the resources development project by having Japan Oil, Gas and Metal National Corporation conduct geological surveys of the planned area and have official development assistance used to build roads and bridges.

- **Italy Contributes EUR 3 Million to SME Cluster Development in Vietnam**

The Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) of Vietnam, the Embassy of Italy, and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) signed a technical assistance project entitled "SME Cluster Development".

The project has a total budget of €3 million and builds on achievements recorded in a recently completed MPI-UNIDO project on "Assistance to Establish the National and Provincial SME Support Infrastructure". This was jointly financed by Finland, Italy and Norway. The objective of the project is to develop the capacity of industry associations and SMEs in three pilot industrial sectors in partnership with Italian industry associations and SMEs.

Mr. Truong Van Doan, Vice Minister of MPI said, "Development of SME clusters will help Vietnamese SMEs to enhance their competitiveness in domestic, regional and global markets. This project will help the Enterprise Development Agency (EDA) under MPI and selected industry associations to draw lessons from the successful experiences of Italy and UNIDO in SME Cluster Development. The project is also an important step towards the implementation of a number of measures under the SME Development Plan 2006-2010, promulgated by the Prime Minister in Decision 236/2006/QD-TTg on 23 October 2006."

Mr. Andrea Perugini, Ambassador of Italy indicated, "Italy appreciates the steps taken by the Vietnamese Government in private sector development, with particular focus on SMEs. SME clusters and enterprise networks are renowned the world over for being the driving force behind Italy's economy. Our experience also provides clear evidence on the pivotal role industry associations can play in facilitating SMEs to act collectively to improve their competitiveness. With the assistance provided by this project, the partnerships to be established between Italian and Vietnamese industry associations and Italian and Vietnamese SMEs will further the excellent technical and commercial cooperation that exists between our countries and yield mutually beneficial outcomes."

Ms. Nilgün Taş, UNIDO Representative pointed out that, "SME clusters (a sectoral and geographical concentration of enterprises which produce and sell a range of related and/or complementary products) and enterprise networks (a group of small and medium-sized firms that cooperate on a joint development project, complementing each other and specializing in order to overcome common problems) help SMEs achieve collective

efficiencies and conquer markets beyond their individual reach. UNIDO's competence in the field of SME cluster development is well established. And, its Cluster Development Programme currently under way in Latin America, Asia, and Africa has yielded very successful results."The project will be implemented under the UN's "One Plan", a joint action programme between the Government and all 14 resident UN organizations in Vietnam.

Social Front

- **Army Officer Rallied Troops In Vietnam At Great Risk**

Ronald Scott Taylor, 64, a highly decorated Vietnam War veteran who became a lawyer in the Justice Department's criminal division, died Jan. 18 at the Department of Veterans Affairs nursing home in Washington.

He had complications from diabetes as a result of exposure to Agent Orange during the war, his family said.

Mr. Taylor, a native of Arlington County and a graduate of Wakefield High School there, graduated from Virginia Tech in 1966 and was commissioned into the Army as an infantry officer. He served two combat tours in Vietnam with the 1st Cavalry Division and the Military Advisory Command.

At the start of the Tet Offensive in January 1968, Mr. Taylor's unit was heavily engaged with the enemy in the Que Son Valley. His platoon was encircled by a North Vietnamese army regiment that repeatedly tried to overrun it. During a 26-hour fight, 20 of his 50 men were wounded. Mr. Taylor was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross -- the military's highest award for valor after the Medal of Honor -- for rallying his men while constantly exposing himself to the enemy fusillade, moving from position to position and calling for and adjusting a concentrated ring of more than 7,000 rounds of friendly artillery fire.

After leaving active duty, Mr. Taylor served in the Army Reserve and was promoted to lieutenant colonel. He graduated from the University of Virginia law school in 1975 and worked at the Justice Department for four years. Survivors include his wife of 40 years, Le Thu Taylor of Falls Church; his mother, Ruth Taylor of Woodstock, Va.; and two brothers, Robert Parks Taylor of Arlington and Kevin Taylor of Aldie.

• Laos

Political Front

- **Thai PM arrives in Laos**

Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva of the Kingdom of Thailand arrived in Vientiane on Friday morning, starting a one day state visit to the Lao PDR as the invitation of Prime Minister Bouasone Bouphavanh.

Welcoming Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and his delegation at the airport were Dr. Nam Viyakhet, Minister of Industry and Commerce, Dr. Boveingkham Vongdala, Head of the Prime Minister's office, Mr. Bounchanh Sinthavong, Vice Mayor of Vientiane,Thai Ambassador to Laos and high ranking Lao officials.Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and his party were escorted by a motorcade through the main street of Vientiane. Upon arriving at the National Assembly, Mr. Abhisit Vejjajiva was greeted by Lao Prime Minister Bouasone Bouphavanh and high-ranking Lao officials.A bilateral talk was also held at the KM 5 conference center. The sides informed each other on their respective country's social-economic development, the co-operation of the two sides in the past and present.

- **Lao and Thai Prime Ministers talks in Vientiane**

The high-level Government delegation of the Lao PDR and of the Kingdom of Thailand, on 23 January afternoon, held talks here.

The two government delegations were headed by the respective Prime Minister Bouasone Bouphavanh, and Abhisit Vejjajiva. The talks proceeded in a most friendly and cordial atmosphere. The heads of the two delegations informed each other of the developments in their countries.

Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva said that Laos is a significant neighboring country of Thailand and the security of Laos is also the security of Thailand. Mr. Abhisit Vejjajiva also confirmed to continue to support the infrastructure development of Laos including the construction of 9 Km railway, road no 11, third and fourth Mekong Friendship bridges. These bridges will link Laos and Thailand as well as open up connections to other countries in the sub-region.

The two leaders also assigned the relevant sectors of each country to continue discussions on adjustments to the purchase price of electricity from Laos, as the financial crisis has affected hydropower development projects.The two sides expressed satisfaction with the progress made in border demarcation between the two countries. Regarding illegal immigration, the two sides agreed to pass responsibility for this area to the cooperation mechanism between Laos and Thailand, with work to continue until finished in strict accordance with the principles agreed to.Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva paid a courtesy visit to Mr. Thongsing Thammavong, President of the National Assembly and visited That Luang Stupa.

- **EU gives 1.6 million Euros for good governance**

European Union (EU) is providing 1.6 million Euro for the programme on good governance and to strengthen the rule of law in Laos,The agreement on this was signed by the Lao government and Delegation of European Commission, at the Ministry of Planning and Investment in Vientiane on 26 January 2009.

Mr Somchit Inthamith, Director General of International Co-operation Department, Ministry of Planning and Investment and Mr Henry Prankerd, Charge' d'Affaires of the EC Delegation to Laos signed the agreement. Mrs Sonam Rana, Resident Coordinator of UNDP, Laos and other high ranking officials witnessed this event.
This bilateral agreement is part of the EC's effort to accelerate the development of Laos in governance reform and to further strengthen the legal system of this country. The generous support of EU shows its strong commitment to this area and in this context it is cooperating with other development aid partners to give backing to the Lao government's work on poverty eradication, in so far as this is linked to governance reform and the legal system.
The programme is for a six year-period and more money than the initial amount will be allocated as the ongoing programme progresses so that the final tally will be 3.3 million Euros. In addition to this, EU believes that by working hand in hand with UNDP and other experienced partners they will be demonstrating an effective and efficient use of resources and better donor coordination.

In 2006, the European Union contributed approximately 1 million Euro to two projects, international law and governance, public administration reform and decentralised service.

- **Laos to host ASEAN Environment Year 2009**

Laos will be the host of ASEAN Environment Year 2009 in March and the host province will be Champassak.

The aim of this once in three years activity is to raise the level of awareness of the environment and to minimize pollution to the environment.Based on precedents, the host decided on the theme of the conference, so that in Brunei in 2002 the theme was on heritage and future and the Cambodia in 2003 opted for the theme on sustainable development.
The theme for this year's conference is," "Ecotourism: our nature, our culture" stressing on environmental preservation, heritage, biodiversity conservation and sustainable development.
Every ASEAN member countries have their own symbols and logos but the host has not logo yet. Thus the organizing committee would like inform all parties and other individual sectors to send their logos to compete at the logo drawing competition for ASEAN Environment 2009 with the theme "ecotourism: our nature, our culture.

The applicants can send their logo to compete now till 20 February this year. The main objective of the competition is to mobilize ideas from public and private sectors to contribute to symbol of celebration of the ASEAN Environment Year 2009, hosted by Laos.
The winner will award 2.5 million kip in cash with a certificate, first runner-up will award 1.5 million kip with a certificate and second runner-up will award 800,000 kip with a certificate and third will award 100,000 kip with a certificate. Further more information contact mobile phone No: 020 562 9444 or 020 580 7138 or logos should be sent at Prime Minister's Office, Water Resource Environment Authority.

- **PM leaves for Kuwait**

(KPL) A high ranking delegation of Laos led by Prime Minister Bouasone Bouphavanh left here yesterday for a three day first official working visit to the State of Kuwait at the invitation of Prime Minister Shelkh Nasser Al-Mohmmed Al-Ahmmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah of the Kuwait.

The visit is aimed to strengthen and enhance the traditional good relation and co-operation between Laos and Kuwait.According to the source from Prime Minister's office, while in Kuwait, the Lao delegation will have a working session with its counterpart where the sides will sign a number of co-operation agreement including the aviation co-operation agreement, MoU on tourism co-operation and other. PM Bouasone will also pay a courtesy visit to the King of Kuwait and President of the National Assembly of Kuwait. He will also receive a courtesy call visit of the President of Kuwait Funding and Kuwait Fund Organisation. PM Bouasone will also attend the meeting of Laos-Kuwait businessmen and the opening ceremony of the Lao Embassy in Kuwait.

- **KOICA gives US$ 10 million to Laos**

Korea International Co-operation Agency (KOICA) has increased aid to Laos for its long term development plans from US$ 8.2 million in 2008 to US$ 10 million for 2009 but on the condition that bilateral co-operative plans between both nations are on an even keel. In spite of the financial crisis in the world, the Republic of Korea government is determined to give a helping hand to Laos to enable her to achieve its development targets.
Recently, president of Korean International Cooperation Agency, xcame to Laos for a two-day visit to strengthen bilateral relationship between the two countries. During his visit he said that KOICA has agreed to increase aid to Laos because this country is facing stiff challenges and the additional money will be used for education, health and rural development. "I am satisfied that the various projects are progressing

well and with the additional fund they will develop at a faster pace," said Mr Park. Mr Jung Sanghyun, Volunteer Manager of KOICA, Laos said that KOICA has decided to allocate US$ 270 million as aid for countries throughout the world.This sum of money, he said, will be used for the 2009 year period for 56 countries and out of this Laos has got an allocation of US$10 million. Last year, KOICA provided US$ 8 million for Laos to build schools and irrigation systems and to support health care service.

Economic Front

- **Laos to produce two million tons of cement by 2012**

Efforts are being made to produce more cement so that by 2011 Laos would be producing one and a half million tons annually and this should be able to meet the demand for all the small and mega projects in the country.

Presently, the cement factories in Laos are producing only one million tons per year whereas the local users use as much as 1.5 million tons. Mr Inphon Phattananouluk, Deputy Head of Finance and Account Service of Agriculture and Industry Development of State Enterprise Company said that the cement plants are stepping up their volume of production so that by 2012 they would be able to produce as much as two million tons annually.

Based on the projection of the increase in demand for cement, the Agriculture and Industry Development State Enterprise Company, decided to enter into a US$77 million joint venture with a Chinese investing company to upgrade the Vangvieng I Cement Production Factory and the agreement between the two parties was inked in September last year.

On completion of the expansion of the cement plant in Vangvieng by 2011, it would be able to produce as much as 750,000 tons per year instead of the present capacity of 76,000 tons per year and so it would be able to fulfill the domestic demand for cement for all the construction projects in Laos. It is also projected that there could even be a surplus of cement by 2011 so that it could be exported to Myanmar and the area straddling the Laos-China border.However, there is a serious drawback to the production capacity of the cement plant in Vangvieng, as it is facing the problem of shortage of electricity and this problem will become acute during the dry season as this seasonal increase in demand is as high as 30 per cent.

- **Gold customers in Laos are retrenching**

The jewelry shops in Talat Sao or Morning Market in Vientiane were not selling their wares like hot cakes during the present Vietnamese Tet and Chinese Lunar New Year season because many gold customers had already retrenched or were out of town. The sale of gold jewelry in Vientiane during this festive period was not like the gold rush days' of the Chinese Lunar New Year and Tet of last year and this is seen in fewer people patronizing the gold shops.

Mr Phouvong Phamisith, Chairman of Lao Jewelry Association commented on such a situation and added that beside these reasons there was the factor of the impact of the global financial crisis.

The gold price was volatile during the festive season, rising sharply during the week before Chinese Lunar New Year and the gold shops had to adjust accordingly, he added. He stated that the price of gold was 3.6 to 3.7 million kip (14,600 baht) for one-baht weight or 15.16 grammes during the festive days but its price was quoted at a lower price eight days earlier, 3.4 million kip (13,650 baht).

Based on such data, Mr Phouvong further commented that the price of gold was volatile compared to same period last year.

A gold retailer in Vientiane's Morning Market said that while there was a steep decline in the number of gold customers for this year's festive season, but during the same period in Thailand, people were lining up to sell their gold jewelry to the jewelry shops because of the sudden spike in the price of gold in the world's metal markets.

- **PM receives new World Bank's director for South East-Asia countries**

Mr. Bouasone Bouphavanh, Prime Minister of the Lao PDR received at his office in Vientiane last week a courtesy visit of Ms. Annette Dixon, the new World Bank's Director for the countries of South - East Asia.

At the talks, PM Bouasone Bouphavanh praised and highly valued the appointment of Ms. Annette Dixon as a big contribution to further strengthen the friendship relation and co-operation between Laos and the World Bank. PM Bouasone also expressed thanks to the World Bank for its support and assistance for the social-economic development in Laos during the past and present time.On this occasion, Ms. Annette Dixon expressed thanks to PM Bouasone for his warm welcome and confirmed that she would do her utmost to enhance the relation and co-operation between Laos and World Bank

- **Thai Government finances Beungkhayong Indoor Stadium**

construction (eco,socio,pol)

The Thai Government has supported more than 20 billion kip (85 million Thai baht) to the Lao Government for constructing an indoor stadium for the 25th South East Asian Games to be organised at this year end in Vientiane.

The foundation stone laying ceremony for the construction of the sports facility was held last Friday at Beungkhayong village, Sisattanak district in Vientiane. The assistance is under the Lao-Thai Cooperation Friendship Project.

The ceremony was attended by Prime Minister of Laos Mr. Bouasone Bouphavanh and his Thai counterpart Abhisit Vejjajiva as well as relevant officials from both sides. The stadium will be a venue for sports competitions of boxing. It is expected that the stadium will be completed within 300 days of the construction or couples of weeks before the opening of the 25th SEA Games.

Social Front

- **Vice President rallies people on 60th anniversary of Army**

Vice President Bounnhang Vorachit and thousands of people were at a rally to mark the 60th anniversary of Lao People's Army at KM 5 Stadium in Savannakhet province, on 23 January.
Governor Vilayvanh Phomkhe, who spoke at this rally touched on the achievements and growth of Lao People's Army during its 60 years history. He said that during this period, Lao national heroes sacrificed their lives to the cause of the revolutionary movement and in the fight against the colonial imperialist, for liberty. . Adapting to the present international and regional circumstances, the Lao army is adopting a two-prong national strategy, national defence and social order.

- **Indian National Day in Laos**

Indian Ambassador to Laos Mr Suresh Kumar Goel held a reception to mark the 60th anniversary of Indian Republic day on 26 January at Don Chan Palace Hotel. Foreign Minister Thongloun Sisoulith other ministers of the Lao cabinet, diplomats stationed in Laos and representatives of international organizations in Laos were some of the guests.

India and The Lao People's Democratic Republic enjoyed a close and friendly relationship and the relationship witnessed a steep upward trend with growing interactions between us in key areas, culture, education and commerce, said Mr Goel. India and Laos share deep rooted historical and cultural linkages for over 2000 years, the

ambassador said, and these are seen in the Buddhist and Hindu influences in architecture, culture, customs and languages in Laos.

During this reception he proposed a toast to President Choumaly Sayasone of Laos, SMT Pratiba Patil, President of India and to the people of Laos.

• Cambodia

Political Front

- **Cambodia Thailand agree on more talks on border dispute**

THAILAND and Cambodia agreed yesterday to more talks to resolve a dispute over a stretch of land at their border near the 900-year-old Preah Vihear temple that spilled over into fighting last year.

The two countries agreed in November to pull out troops from the disputed area and follow up with joint demarcation of the heavily mined frontier. However, the fall of the Thai government in December delayed implementation of the plan.

Kasit, who was a prominent member of the royalist Thai protest group that stirred up last year's bad blood over the temple, said it was important to resolve the long-running dispute through peaceful means.

The pair also agreed on a joint committee to meet in March to look at a stretch of disputed sea in the Gulf of Thailand believed to contain oil and natural gas. The Hindu Preah Vihear temple sits on an escarpment that forms the natural border between the two Southeast Asian nations.

- **U Win Shein appointed as Ambassador to Cambodia**

The Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council of the Union of Myanmar has appointed U Win Shein as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Union of Myanmar to the Kingdom of Cambodia.

- **Vice president of German parliament to visit Cambodia**

Wolfgang Thierse, Vice President of the German Parliament, will officially visit Cambodia from Jan. 31 to Feb. 4 to beef up the friendly bilateral relations, said an official press release here Thursday. Wolfgang will respectively pay courtesy calls with Senate President Chea Sim, National Assembly President Heng Samrin, and Prime Minister Hun Sen, said the release from the National Assembly. The vice parliamentarian president will also meet representatives of the political parties which have seats at the National Assembly, as well as representatives from the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) and other national and international institutions, it added.

- **Ke Kim Yan uncertain of future plans**

GENERAL Ke Kim Yan, former commander-in-chief of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces, is uncertain of the future following his unceremonious removal from the post last week.

The general previously said he resigned his post for "health" reasons, but Deputy Prime Minister Nhek Bun Chhay said Tuesday that the CPP stalwart was removed by Prime Minister Hun Sen because his business activities were distracting him from his role as head of the armed forces.

Economic Front

- **Business survey set for completion in March: government**

First nationwide business survey in five years to be conducted from February to March as government secures funding from Japan.

THE government next month is to conduct its first countrywide business survey in five years as part of an initiative leading to a proposed full-scale economic census in 2011, Economic Statistics Department Director Mich Kanthul said.

Starting February 9, the month long initiative will see "four hundred officials ... go down to every village, commune and district in cities and provinces throughout the country",

Mich Kanthul added. The survey would be aimed at improving the quality of Cambodia's economic data. Data collection will continue until March 8.

The Kingdom has not conducted a nationwide economic survey since 2004 due to a lack of funding, San Sy Than, director general of the National Institute of Statistics at the Ministry of Planning, told the Post. Foreign supportThis year's survey will be funded by the Japan International Cooperation Agency, a development organ of the Japanese government, at an estimated cost of US$300,000, he said.

San Sy Than attempted to ease concerns that the statistics might be used as part of tax-collection efforts, saying instead that the aim of the survey was to catalogue Cambodian businesses. Mich Kanthul said government efforts culminating in a 2011 business census would help boost foreign investment in the Kingdom by providing accurate information to prospective investors. Collected data will be used to pinpoint the size, scope, location and ownership of businesses in the Kingdom, Khin Sovorlak, deputy director of Economic Statistic Department, said. This, in turn, will allow the government to accurately break down the Cambodian economy into industries and sectors. In recent years, this information has been cobbled together courtesy of data from various relevant ministries, Mich Kanthul said.

Last year's population census by the Ministry of Planning estimates that 16.8 percent of Cambodian families run their own businesses.

- **New fibre-optic cable will connect Cambodia to China**

A USD18 million infrastructure project is set to connect Cambodia to China's Yunnan Province in April 2009 through a new high speed fibre-optic cable. Construction of the cable has recently been completed, with help from a Chinese loan, by project implementer Cambodia Telecom. So Khun, Minister of Posts and Telecommunications, said the project will improve the quality of internet and telecoms services, and help to cut-prices, increasing the country's business competitiveness.

Social Front

- **Cambodia tribunal dispute runs deeper**

At first glance it seems to be simply a numbers game: whether to try 5, 10 or more defendants for the deaths of an estimated 1.7 million people at the hands of the Khmer Rouge three decades ago.

But as a United Nations-backed tribunal prepares to hold its first trial session next month, it is embroiled in a wrangle over numbers that goes to the heart of longstanding concerns about the tribunal's fairness and independence.

The Cambodian government, critics say, is attempting to limit the scope of the trials for its own political reasons, a limit that the critics say would compromise justice and could discredit the entire process.

The first defendant is the man with perhaps the most horrifying record: Kaing Guek Eav, known as Duch, the commander of the Tuol Sleng torture house in Phnom Penh, where at least 14,000 people were sent to their deaths. His trial is to open with a procedural hearing, set for Feb. 17, at which more substantive sessions, involving witnesses and evidence, are expected to be scheduled..

Four other defendants, all of whom were members of the Khmer Rouge Central Committee, are also in custody, waiting their turns to face charges in crimes that occurred while they were at the top of the chain of command from 1975 to 1979. As much as one-fourth of the population died from disease, hunger, overwork or execution under the Khmer Rouge's brutal Communist rule.

Those five defendants are enough, Cambodian officials say.But foreign legal experts counter that within reasonable limits, the judicial process should not be arbitrarily limited. After a decade of difficult and not always friendly negotiations between the United Nations and the Cambodians, a hybrid tribunal is in place, with Cambodian and foreign co-prosecutors and panels of co-judges in an awkward political and legal balancing act. Now, even before Duch's trial gets under way, that balance is being tested.Last month the foreign co-prosecutor, a Canadian named Robert Petit,

submitted six more names to the court for investigation, saying that he had gathered enough evidence to support possible charges. Petit's Cambodian counterpart, Chea Leang, objected - not on legal grounds, but for reasons that appear to reflect the government's position on the trials.

In Cambodia, though, courts do not head off in their own directions without tight control from Hun Sen or the people around him. Some advocates of the tribunal - the Extraordinary Chambers of the Courts of Cambodia, or ECCC - see it as offering Cambodia a model for a more independent judiciary. Most Cambodians are eager to see Khmer Rouge leaders brought to trial, according to an extensive survey published last week by the Human Rights Center at the University of California, Berkeley.

- **Hundreds left homeless in Cambodia after forced eviction**

Over 150 poor urban families were forcibly evicted from central Phnom Penh in Cambodia at the weekend. The vast majority of them have been left homeless. Cambodian security forces and demolition workers carried out the evictions of 152 families from Dey Kraham community in the early hours of Saturday. At around 3am, an estimated 250 police, military police and workers hired by the company claiming to own the land blocked access to the community before dispersing the population with tear gas and threats of violence.At 6am, excavators moved in and levelled the village. Some of the families were not able to retrieve belongings from their homes before the demolition. Officials from Phnom Penh municipality were present during the destruction.

Amnesty International called on the Cambodian authorities to stop denying people the right to housing and to ensure adequate compensation and restitution for those evicted on Saturday.

There is no clean water, no electricity, sewage or basic services. Earlier, most of the affected community rejected being resettled there because it was too far from Phnom Penh, where they work, mostly as street vendors.Local authority representatives sold the land to the company, 7NG, in 2005 without the knowledge, participation or consultation with the affected community. Some 300 families were coerced into moving amid threats,

harassment and intimidation, while the 152 families continued to dispute the validity of the sale and refused to give up the land without compensation.

Just over a week before the forced eviction, the affected community told the authorities and the company that they were willing to move if they received adequate compensation for the land. Many of them have lived there, uncontested, for decades and have strong claims to the land under the 2001 Land Law. The company then increased the offer of compensation, but the two sides had not yet reached an agreement.

Business and Politics in The Muslim World

Report on South Asia

February 4, 2009

Ghashia Kayani

NEWSMONITORING OF JANUARY:

BANGLADESH:

Dhaka int'l trade fair kicks off today

A month-long 14th Dhaka International Trade Fair (DITF)-2009 kicks off from today (Thursday) with the aim of giving a boost to country's trade and commerce. Organizers expect the participating companies will get above Tk50 crore spot orders from the month-long gathering for local and foreign traders.DITF is a yearly event of Bangladesh government, which mainly aims to showcase local products to foreign buyers. The Ministry of Commerce and Export Promotion Bureau (EPB) is jointly organizing the fair at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar in Dhaka. President Professor Dr Iajuddin Ahmed is expected to inaugurate the month-long DITF on the ground adjacent to the western side of Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Centre at 11.00 am today. 300 pavilions and stalls from home and abroad will be set up in the fair. The partner country of this year is Sri Lanka and 12 other countries will participate in the fair while the number of participating countries was eight last year, the organizers said. A high official of EPB said, "We are very much hopeful of good response from both the local and foreign customers, adding that "Like previous year, DITF-2009 will also get significant export orders from foreign and local buyers and the amount of spot orders will be above Tk50crore this year."The fair will help foreign investors and buyers create new business opportunities in Bangladesh and also establish direct and fruitful business contacts with their Bangladeshi counterparts, EPB officials said.

109 ordinances of CG need Parliament sanction, face legal encumbrances

Fate of 109 ordinances including that of separation of the judiciary promulgated during two years of regime of the caretaker government depends on endorsement of those by the Parliament of the elected government and those are facing legal encumbrances.As many as 42 ordinances were promulgated in 2007, 72 promulgated in 2008 and some of those have been repealed later aggregating 109 which are now waiting for sanction of the Parliament.Among these, some ordinances are very important providing for separation of judiciary from the executive, establishment of a permanent and non-political attorney service, creation of separate secretariat for the judiciary independent of the law ministry, national identity registration, TAC, upazila parisad (amendment), separate secretariat for election commission, right to information and holding of 9th parliamentary election. All ordinances which are enacted by the CG beyond its routine work have become questionable and those will be cancelled automatically if the elected government refrains from approving those.As to ordinance separating the judiciary, Barrister M Amir-ul Islam said CG's Cr.P.C amendment for separating judiciary will not be void as it was a routine work on the part of CG to comply with Supreme Court in this regard. Explaining legal proposition of ordinance making he said "As per Article 93 (1) of the Constitution, at anytime when [Parliament stands dissolved or is not in session], if the President is satisfied that circumstances exist which render immediate action necessary, he may make and promulgate such Ordinances as the circumstances appear to him to require, and any Ordinance so made shall, as from its promulgation have the like force of law as an Act of Parliament."

Agro-credit disbursement up 27.22 pc in Jul-Nov

Agricultural credit disbursement recorded a robust growth of 27.22 per cent in the first five months of the current fiscal as the central bank took some measures including relaxation of rules and regulations of loan payment. Eight state-owned banks and financial institutions along with the private commercial banks (PCBs) disbursed Tk 33.77 billion as farm credit during the period from July to November of the fiscal 2008-09 as against Tk 26.55 billion of the corresponding period of the previous fiscal, according to the Bangladesh Bank (BB) statistics. During the period, eight state-owned banks and financial institutions disbursed Tk 26.38 billion compared to Tk 18.69 billion of the same period of the previous fiscal while the PCBs lent Tk 7.39 billion to farmers as against Tk 7.86 billion of the previous fiscal. The state-run banks and financial institutions are Sonali Bank Limited, Janata Bank Limited, Agrani Bank Limited, Rupali Bank Limited, Bangladesh Krishi Bank (BKB), Rajshahi Krishi Unnayan Bank (RAKUB), Bangladesh Rural Development Board (BRDB) and Bangladesh Samobaya Bank Limited (BSBL). The loans have been given to agro-based eight sub-sectors like crops, irrigation

equipment, livestock, agricultural products marketing and fisheries. The banks and financial institutions have achieved 36.02 per cent of the disbursement target of the current fiscal, which has been fixed at nearly Tk 94 billion, 13 per cent up from the last fiscal, the BB's data showed. "We are hopeful of achieving the agricultural credit disbursement target by the end of this fiscal," a senior official of the Bangladesh Bank (BB) said. He said the central bank wants to ensure credit facilities for each interested farmer across the country without any harassment.

Overseas employment exceeds 8.75mln in 2008

The number of Bangladeshis cleared for overseas employment in 2008 exceeded 8,75,000 creating a new record. A record amount of nearly 9 billion US dollar has also been received as remittances in 2008. Previous year (2007) witnessed the employment abroad of over 8,32,000 which was then a record too. Foreign Adviser Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, who is also in charge of the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, expressed his deep satisfaction at this. "It is my hope that the next government would continue with this effort, because the opportunities of new markets are vast", he said. Iftekhar said "At all times, however, we must remember that the welfare of our workers must remain a priority. A migrant worker is not just a revenue generating machine. He is also a human being. Indeed, he is our pride."

Francesc Vendrell appreciates general election

Francesc Vendrell, head of UN Secretary General's High-level Panel for evaluating the parliamentary elections, on Friday said 9th parliamentary election in Bangladesh has been held in a free, fair and credible manner. Evaluating all reports presented by local and foreign election observers and diplomats, Francesc Vendrell expressed his opinion about election at a press briefing held at Hotel Sonargaon in the city yesterday. Bhojraj Pokharel, Chief Election Commissioner of Nepal and Aracelly Santana Former Deputy Director of the United Nations Electoral Assistance Division were present on the occasion. Congratulating all political parties, defeated or winning, on their participation in the polls, he said "Defeated and winning, both parties are important for running the parliament by a democratic government. The opposition needs to make its representation in the parliament to make it functional."Replying to query whether the 9th parliamentary election has met international standard, he said the matter has been already manifested by various observers from Asia, Europe and commonwealth states who expressed satisfaction over this poll for being of international standard. "From media understanding and assessment reports of various observers I can conclude that this poll has maintained international standards."About BNP's

allegation of attack on its supporters during poll, he said if such incidents really took place the aggrieved party may file objection to the election commission.

258 MPs elect from AL led grand alliance sworn in

A number of 258 parliament members elect of the 9th parliament belonging to Awami League led grand combine were sworn in as MPs in the parliament complex Saturday afternoon. Speaker Barrister Muhammad Jamir Uddin Sircar administered the oath to the newly elected lawmakers in two phases at the oath-taking room at Level-1 in the East Block of the parliament complex.
In the first phase, Awami League President Sheikh Hasina, Presidium Members Zillur Rahman, Abdul Jalil, Abdur Razzak, Tofael Ahmed, Sheikh Fazlul Karim Selim and others took oath. Hasina entered in oath room at 3: 24 pm and oath of 1st session concluded at 3: 43 pm. Jatiya Party Chairman Hossain Mohammad Ershad, Workers Party President Rashed Khan Menon, Jatiya Samjtantrik Dal President Hassanul Haque Inu and other MPs elect of Awami League, Workers Party and JSD (Inu) were sworn in at 4:15 pm during second phase. As many as 228 MPs took oath from Awami League marking a record of highest number of MPs' taking oath from a single party since restoration of democracy in the country in 1990. 25 MPs from Jatiya Party, three from Jatiya Samajtantirik Dal and two from Workers Party took oath yesterday. The oath was conducted under the provision of the Article 148 of the Bangladesh Constitution and Rule 5 of the Parliament Rules of Procedure. During oath all MP kept standing and uttered: "Being elected I am declaring with firm determination that the responsibilities which are going to be performed by me will be done lawfully and honesty. I shall pay respect and loyalty to Bangladesh and I shall not allow my duties as MP to be influenced and biased by my personal interest."

New govt to face 5 major challenges to boost power, energy

The new government will have to craft pragmatic strategies to deal with five major challenges it is going to face in boosting the country's power and energy supply as Awami League committed in its election manifesto.The challenges are ensuring fuel supply, necessary fund mobilisation, removal of bureaucratic tangle, accessibility to machines and building associated infrastructures and reducing implementation periods, energy experts said.Bangladesh Awami League, which is set to form the next government, had announced in its election manifesto - Charter for Change - it would increase the power generation to 7,000 MW by 2013 from the existing production level. As per the manifesto, the power supply will be increased to 5000 MW by 2011 and to 7000 MW by 2013.At present, the country's electricity generation is about 3,500 MW against the demand for about 5,500 MW.According to the experts, the arrangement for additional gas supply to augment power generation will be the first and main challenge for the new government.To do that, they said, it

would require about 600 million cubic feet of gas per day (MMCFD) to generate the existing 3500 MW of electricity, and additional 600 MMCFD gas will require to be put in place to raise it to 7000 MW. So, the new government will have to arrange additional 600 million cubic feet per day (MMCFD) to reach the power generation target. But, there is no immediate option to increase the gas production in the present situation.Prof Ijaz Hossain, a teacher of Chemical Engineering Department of BUET, said if the government aggressively tries to increase gas production it will need at least two years' time to find new gas from new exploration. "If it tries to increase gas production from the existing fields, it'll also require at least one and half years' time…. So, the challenge is real, but there is possibility to increase production from some existing gas fields like Titas, Habiganj, Bibiyana and Moulvibazar," he said. Prof Ijaz insisted that the new government needs to look for alternative sources of energy supply like coal to increase the power generation. The second challenge for the coming government is to mobilise required funds to arrange the additional gas for fuelling power plants.There will be a need to invest several billion dollars for giving a boost to gas production while, according to a former chairman of Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB), about US$ 4.5 billion will be required to invest in power generation, transmission and distribution segments to raise the electricity generation to 7,000 MW. Prof Shahidul Islam Khan, Director of Energy Centre, BUET, said purchasing new power plants would be another major challenge for the new government as most of the power plant manufacturers in the USA and Europe are booked until 2011 to sell their machines. The fourth challenge will be to simultaneously building associated infrastructures like installation of gas supply lines and power transmission and distribution lines for gas and power supply.Another big challenge is to improve the bureaucratic decision-making process. Now at least 18 months are needed to have a final decision on any infrastructure project like setting up of power plants, as there are many ministries, departments and agencies that need to give their own clearances to any purchase proposal involving Tk 50 crore or more."Any file on such purchase proposal needs to move around at least 40 hands of bureaucrats for their decisions," said a top government official.He said: "If the new government wants to gear up the decision-making process, it must improve the efficiency level and reduce the procedural timeframe. And the same steps are necessary in project implementation too.

Main reason for BNP’s poll debacle is their association with war criminals: Col Oli

President of Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Colonel (Retd) Oli Ahmed on Saturday said one of the main reasons for BNP's debacle in the recent parliamentary polls is their association with war criminals and razakars (collaborators). Talking to BSS here, he said people are more conscious now than anytime in the past about what the war criminals and razakars have done against the country and its people during the War of Liberation. "There's no need for BNP's unholy alliance with razakars or the similar forces for the sake of political interests," he said

describing the party, led by Begum Khaleda Zia, a big platform in the national politics. Colonel Oli, also an MP-elect of the December 29 parliamentary polls, mentioned the second reason for BNP's poll disaster as BNP Chairperson supports corrupts after her release from jail. "She did not take a proper decision in this regard, rather she ought to have expelled them from the party," he observed. The other reason the LDP chief mentioned responsible for BNP's poll thrashing was excess of the sycophants, who, he said, always encircled Begum Zia only to invite a disaster in her political career this time. Oli Ahmed said BNP's field-level leaders and workers were confused about the party's participation in the election. Begum Khaleda Zia should have had also a clear stand about her party's participation in the Ninth parliamentary polls, he said. Had Khaleda Zia expelled some former corrupt ministers, MPs and party leaders, Oli said, she would not have make mistakes in nominating candidates. Rather, he observed, she would have got people's support in a larger way. The LDP chief said those who had worked with her had no sincerity and responsibility for the party. If she wished, she could take advice from the experienced persons, he said.

BB facilitates SCBs for payment of fuel oil import bills

The Bangladesh Bank (BB) has strengthened its intervention in foreign exchange market to facilitate the commercial banks for payment of fuel oil import bills. "The central bank took the move aimed at keeping the country's inter-bank foreign exchange market stable," officials said. As part of the operation, the BB provided overdraft (OD) facilities for US$40 million to a state-owned commercial bank (SCB) for payment of its petroleum products import bills. Besides, the central bank sold $14 million at the market rate directly to one SCB and a foreign commercial bank recently to meet the growing demand for the greenback."We have provided commercial banks with foreign currency support to settle import payment bills for petroleum products," a BB senior official said.Import of petroleum products sharply rose by 56.61 per cent to $923.03 million during July-October period of this fiscal as against $578.31 million of the same period of the previous fiscal, according to the central bank statistics. The BB official said the central bank will continue its foreign currency support to the commercial banks mainly for making payments of fuel oils, fertiliser and food grains import.

Deny shelter to terrorists, insurgents: India to Dhaka

India hopes the new government in Bangladesh will crack down not only on terrorist groups but also ensure that insurgent groups from northeast India do not find shelter in the country, the Indian prime minister has said. "We hope the new Bangladesh government will take appropriate steps to ensure that Bangladeshi soil would not be

allowed for terrorist activities against India," Manmohan Singh said on Saturday in Shillong, capital of the north-east Indian state of Meghalaya, bordering Bangladesh. His comment comes a day after India's new home minister P Chidambaram expressed hope with prime minister-elect Shiekh Hasina taking over the reigns, Bangladesh will make a "new beginning" by denying sanctuary to banned groups like United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB). "Now we can neutralise the leadership of these banned elements which have found sanctuary in Bangladesh," Chidambaram said. The Indian Border Security Force (BSF) has asked for more battalions of forces to curb infiltration, movement of militants and enhance management on the India-Bangladesh border. The BSF has pointed out that only 91 km border has been fenced and work is in progress on 129 km of the 577-km Bangladesh border in Assam and Meghalaya, a portion seen as the most infiltration prone. The BSF has blamed its counterpart Bangladesh Rifles for objecting to the fencing in 75 patches along the international border in northeast, but the Banglaesh border guards have recently allowed the work to continue in 46 places. Recently, Chidambaram had said New Delhi was not satisfied with the progress in fencing on India-Bangladesh border and would take steps to speed up the project. Work under phase-I of the Indo-Bangla fencing project started in 1989 and fencing was done in 854 km against the approved target of 857 km. Phase-II involved 2429 km of the total 4,096 km long border.

Historic Tevaga Day observed

The historic Tevaga Day was observed here on Sunday through various programmes organised by different organisations in the district.On January 4, 1947, the then British police opened fire on unarmed farmers who waged movement demanding increased right to production with the slogan "we offer life, but not rice" at Talpukur village in Chirirbandar upazila in the district killing 2 farmers. Later, the Tevaga movement turned into one of the major anti-British agitations through the supreme sacrifice of many farmers in different areas in the district. On the occasion of the day, a colourful procession was brought out from Talpukur here this morning. Hundreds of local farmers and Saontal indigenous people joined the procession.Besides, non-government organisation (NGO) IVS Bangladesh and Tevaga Chetona Parisad organized rallies and discussions.

New govt to formulate comprehensive policy to overcome power crisis: PDB Chairman

To free the country from severe power crisis, the new government will have to take a comprehensive policy including surety of smooth supply of gas and proper use of

coal to generate required electricity."The PDB has sufficient capacity to generate required electricity against the demand for 5550 megawatt. But as our power plants don't get sufficient supply of gas, we are failing to generate required electricity," PDB Chairman Shawkat Ali told The Bangladesh Today on Sunday.Replying to a query about the role of new government on how it would increase the generation of power, the PDB Chairman said it would be a great challenge for the new government as the power sector is yet to get any assurance of funding. "It is not only a great challenge for our country but also it is a challenge for the whole world. As our governments cannot ensure adequate funding, it would be a very difficult to upgrade and develop the power sector," Shawkat Ali said.He further said it would very difficult for the government to formulate a comprehensive power policy if gas and coal supply reduce drastically day by day. "However, as the caretaker government had taken initiative to generate more 1000 megawatt of electricity within December 2008, already 400 megawatt of electricity were added to the grid. We are expecting that we will be able to generate the rest 600 megawatt within next month," the PDB Chairman said.Emphasising on coal, he said the next government will have to attach importance on coal based power plants as if any fresh well of natural gas is not discovered. Around ninety per cent of the power plants of the country are fired by gas and many industries and factories are also based on this natural resource. According to PDB sources the PDB has the capacity to generate 3900 MW to 4000 MW electricity against the demand for 5000 MW. According to sources present gas reserves, estimated at 11 trillion cubic feet (TCF) may be exhausted before 2020. The gas demand has increased by 200-250 million cubic feet per day (MMCFD) in the last few years. It may be pointed out that the BNP-led four-party alliance government had initiated short and long term projects in order to provide electricity to most of the population at reasonable price and to achieve overall socio-economic development of the country, but the implementation of the short term projects had become uncertain due to widespread corruption and non availability of funds.

Pro-migrant ordinance demanded

Hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshi workers leave the country for employment abroad to change their lot but some of them, instead, return home as dead bodies with their dreams lost. Many others come back empty handed as they fail to secure jobs.Some 2237 expatriate Bangla-deshi workers, six on an average daily died in 2008, of them 418 deaths occurred in Malaysia alone.This was disclosed at a discussion meeting at the National Press Club organised by IMA (Organisation of Talking for Migrant Rights), a research foundation, yesterday.A documentary was shown at the meeting where recorded voices of many workers narrated their sufferings. One worker said, "I came to (Malaysia) for working and earning money. I have been working for 18 hours a day for last 38 days with an organisation but I have not got my salary yet." Another worker said "There was an agreement with my

employer that it would give me 934 Ringit but after one month they paid me 430 Ringit." Many workers alleged that they were confined to a storeroom at the airport for five days without food.Keynote presenter Radyan Rahave said they are working to identify whether existing laws and policies are capable of ensuring rights of cheated and deceived migrants to get compensation, to determine how arbitration and mediation are being conducted by BAIRA and BMET, to generate a set of recommendations based on experience of the concerned and common views for implementation by the government and other stake holders to reduce workers' sufferings.He said the government should immediately implement the recommendations given by the taskforce, improve work environment at BMET and MoEWOE, introduce a system of receiving complains through electronic means so that a migrant is able to know about it from a distance.
Prior to arbitration of the case of migrants, the investigation officer (IO) should counsel them to create an atmosphere where both parties will feel free to disclose facts properly, he added.He also spoke on the need for modification of existing ordinance and adoption of a pro-migration ordinance which is more important than any other steps.

Oli urges Hasina not to allow corrupts in cabinet

Congratulating Sheikh Hasina for AL-led grand alliance's landslide victory under her leadership in the 9th parliamentary election, Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) President Colonel (retd) Oli Ahmed called upon the coming Premier not to allow in the cabinet those persons who were involved in corruption earlier.
"I am calling upon Sheikh Hasina not to allow any corrupt in the cabinet as people have given their mandate in favour of AL-led grand alliance against corruption this year. Hence, you (Hasina) will have to strengthen the anti-corruption drive and give a teaching to those persons who have already been elected as MPs but were engaged in corruption," Colonel Oli said.LDP President made this call while he was speaking at a reception given to him by his party men at Maghbazar party's central office yesterday.He said a great responsibility has been imposed on Sheikh Hasina through people's mandate in the election. As a Prime Minister she will have to respect the people's verdict, meeting their demand. "Sheikh Hasina will have to bring war criminals under trial as the countrymen have been demanding it for long," LDP President said.He urged the new democratic government led by Sheikh Hasina to abolish the caretaker government system in order to protect the country and its people from the political and economical disaster which was created by unskilled Advisors to the CG."The country's economy is facing a dreadful situation right now as unelected caretaker government formed by inefficient persons were totally aloof from the people and pushed the people into uncertainty. It is the high time to abolish this system through amending constitution," he added.Replying to a query, he said that those ordinances passed by the caretaker government which are detrimental for the country and its people should be cancelled.

New govt needs to emphasise on energy: Speakers

Speakers at a discussion meeting on Monday urged the newly elected government to solve the energy crises, maritime boundaries with India and Myanmar and a country policy for building up Bangladesh."We do hope the newly elected government will produce more electricity so that our energy resources can be used in other sector like mills and industry. On the other hand, the problem of identification of maritime boundaries with India and Myanmar should be solved for the greater interest of the country," speakers said at a discussion meeting titled 'Energy reso-urces, Water Boundary, Country Policy and Transparency and Our Duty' held at the National Press Club yesterday.Journalist Abu Rushed Ahmed said, "India and Myanmar entered into our maritime boundary illegally just before the national election. They have done everything for their national interest. But our government doesn't do anything about the issue. On the other hand, the two major political parties didn't mention anything to save our sea reso-urces. Will we not do anything to protect our independence and sovereignty?"Former energy adviser Mah-mudur Rahman said the main duty of the newly elected government is to return dyna-mism to the energy sector. If they try to do that we will cooperate with them. "This government will not allow setting up tri-nation gas pipe line sacrificing the interest of Bangladesh," he added.He said the government should not waste time by deep-sea exploration and the government should activate the BAPEX as soon as possible. Rita Rahman read out the summary of the keynote paper. She said, "There have been significant development activities in the offshore regions of West coast of Myanmar. Recent discovery is from Daewoo A-1/A-3 blocks of Bengal Basin. Besides, there are similar advancements in drilling, completion and production technologies that can reduce the risk of offshore E&P program."In the keynote paper she made some recommendations. These are: Bangladesh needs to define the maritime boundaries in the offshore regions as soon as possible. Exploration from the East coast of India and the West coast of Myanmar could lead to depletion in some of the fields that could potentially belong to Bangladesh. Form a partnership with an International Operating Company (IOC). The partnership and the negotiation with IOC must be done by Bangladeshi petroleum experts who have strong technical and business background. If this is not done then Bangladesh will end up like Nigeria. Defining a technological strategy together with IOC that would definitely enhance the possibility of success.

$14b fetched by exporting 17 lakh workers in 2 years'

Foreign Adviser Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury who is also in charge of the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment today said in the past two years the country earned over US$ 14 billion by exporting 17 lakh workers. He described it as an 'unprecedented success' in manpower export. Iftekhar said this

at a farewell meeting with senior officials of the Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment Ministry. He thanked the officials for their total cooperation in the discharge of his responsibility. The adviser said during the last two years the government signed memorandums of understanding (MoUs) with some countries aimed at increasing manpower export by exploring new employment market. He stressed the importance of continuing the present trend of manpower export to increase foreign exchange earning for the country.

Sheikh Hasina's cabinet sworn in

Awami League President Sheikh Hasina was sworn-in- as the Prime Minister on Tuesday leading Bangladesh to democracy at the end of a two-year unrepresentative rule by an emergency government backed by Army.
The new Prime Minister and the ministers of her cabinet were administrated the oath of office by President Iajuddin Ahmed at a simple ceremony at Bangabhaban in the evening. The historic transition to democracy took place following the massive victory of the Awami League-led grand alliance in the 9th parliament elections held in December 29 which virtually demolished the BNP-led four-party alliance politically. Oaths were administered in three phases to the Prime Minister, Ministers and State Ministers separately. President administered the oath to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina under article 56 (3) and other ministers and state ministers under article 56 (2). Millions of Bangladeshis at home and abroad witnessed on television the oath taking ceremony of the new cabinets with high hopes of the change and better days pronounced by Sheikh Hasina which spell-bound the people specially the young generation with the dream of digital Bangladesh, vision 2021, employment and essentials at reduced price.Apart from Sheikh Hasina, some 31 MPs of the Awami League led grand alliance were also sworn in as ministers and state ministers. The cabinet secretary conducted the ceremony. By forming this cabinet Sheikh Hasina has given a real surprise which she had promised as the cabinet members excluded senior party leaders identified as reformists and all those who had alleged involvement in corruption or anti-party activities. Most of those selected posses clean images and will hold ministerial posts for the first time.The MPs sworn-in- as Ministers are Abdul Mal Abul Muhit, Matia Chowdhury, Barrister Shafique Ahmed, A K Khandoker, Raziuddin Ahmed Raju, Advocate Shahara Khatun, Syed Ashraful Islam, Khandaker Mosharrof Hossain, Rezaul Haque Hira, Abul Kalam Azad, Enamul Haque Mostafa Shahid, Dilip Barua, Ramesh Chandra Sen, GM Quader, Lieutenant Colonel Faruk Khan (Retd), Syed Abul Hossain, Dr. Abdur Razzak, Dr Afasrul Amin, Dr. A F M Ruhul Haque, Dr. Dipu Moni, Nurul Islam Nahid, Abdul Latif Siddiqui and Abdul Latif Biswas while the MPs sworn-in as State Ministers include Advocate Mustafizur Rahman, Dr. Hassan Mahmud, Captain (retd) A B Tazul Islam, Tanjim Ahmed Sohel Taj, Begum Munnojan Sufian, Dipankar Talukdar, Ahad Ali Sarker and Architect Yeasef Osman. However, the portfolios among the cabinet members are yet to be distributed till filing of this report yesterday night.

Earlier on Monday congratulating Bangladesh Awami League President and Grand alliance leader Sheikh Hasina for being elected as the Leader of the House, President Iajuddin Ahmed formally invited her to form the new government and take oath at Bangabhaban as Prime Minister, as her party and the AL-led Grand Alliance swept the crucial polls bagging 262 seats in the 299-seat parliament. Over 900 invitees including former presidents, former chief advisers, chief justice, speaker, advisers, heads of diplomatic missions, political leaders, senior civil and military officials, editors, freedom fighters and national award recipients attended the grand oath taking ceremony. A five-member representative delegation of BNP comprising MP-elect Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury MK Anwar, Barkatullah Bulu, Shahiduddin Chowdhury Annie and Abul Khair Bhuiyan also attended the oath taking ceremony. More than 100 reporters from the print and electronic media, including foreign journalists from BBC, Reuters, AFP, AP, Xinhua and PTI, covered the landmark event while Bangladesh Television, Bangladesh Betar and private television channels broadcast the ceremony live. The oath-taking ceremony was also shown live from three mega screens at Bangabandhu Avenue, South Plaza of Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban and RAJUK Avenue. After the function, the President hosted a dinner in honour of the Prime Minister, ministers and state ministers, deputy ministers and invited guests. While this correspondent talked to various sections of people found that Hasina and her cabinet assumed office amidst high expectations of the people that the new government would bring the skyrocketing prices of essentials within the purchasing capacity of the poor and the common people, combat corruption and terrorism."Actually we are peace-loving people. We have a great expectation of this new government. We are always ready to co-operate with any elected democratic government if it works for the people. Since independence, many governments came to power with commitments and words in order to ease our sufferings and sorrows but instead of fulfilling their words and commitment, they intensified our suffering through their influential political leaders and activists. We want to see the end of a political government which is only busy to milk public money for its own political persons in many ways instead of doing good for the people. We hope taking lesson from the past mistakes this government will engage itself only in working for the people," political analysts, economists, teachers and common people in their instant reaction told The Bangladesh Today.

A system will be introduced to establish people’s ownership: Hasina

After being sworn-in as new Prime Minister of the country, Awami League President Sheikh Hasina at a press conference at Bangabhaban on Tuesday said her new government wants to introduce a system where people's ownership will be established."We all will have to be careful so that nobody will be able to snatch away people's democratic rights. We also like to introduce such a system in which people's ownership and representation, everywhere will be established," expressing

gratefulness to people of the country, Caretaker Government and the Election Commission, the newly elected Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina told journalists. When asked about her reaction, she said it is a great responsibility for me to do the task assigned by the people, properly. "We will have to work hard to fulfill the people's cherished demands so that people will be able to lead a happy and prosperous life," she stated. Replying to a query about the new faces in her cabinet, Sheikh Hasina said everybody likes novelty and freshness. "The MPs, who have been included in the cabinet, all have come to this position through their political background. So, all have the rights to get something. Allah willing, more new faces will be included in the cabinet," she added.Replying to another query about what would be the main task of her government, the Prime Minister said the foremost responsibility will be to arrest the abnormal price hike of essentials. "My government's main task is to bring prices within purchase capacity of the commoners. Initiatives will be taken in order to make agricultural inputs available. Above all, a change will have to be made in the country," Hasina answered.

380 MW power generation in Ashuganj stopped

Ashuganj power station has stopped generation of 380 megawatt power due to mechanical disturbance of its third, fourth and fifth units. Sources said on Tuesday generation of electricity of 100 megawatt in 3rd unit and 140 megawatt in fifth unit halted due to problem in auxiliary power voltage and interruption in air compressor respectively. Apart from this, production of 140 megawatt electricity in fourth unit stopped from December 30 for similar mechanical disturbance."3rd unit went out of order at 5:45am, later disturbance in fifth unit appeared at 6:30am. But we hope we will be able to repair all three units by Tuesday evening," said Sazzad Hossain, an official of Ashuganj power station. Meanwhile a high-up of Power Grid Company of Ban-gladesh (PGCB) said "The machines are disordered due to problem at control circuit in air compressor system. Very soon we will overcome this crisis."Talking to The Bangladesh Today, a high-up in PDB admitted that these power stations have been set up under technical assistance of foreign companies and our local engineers are not capable of repairing mechanical troubles timely for their lack of knowledge and negligence. According to PDB sources per day electricity demand in the country is 5000 MW whereas PDB has the capacity to generate 3900 MW to 4000 MW electricity.

Tamim leaves with frustration as offshore bidding deals, coal policy remain unapproved

Chief Adviser's Special Assistant Dr M Tamim on Tuesday said that he is leaving the Power and Energy Ministry with deep frustration as he could not achieve a target to sign deals on offshore gas block bidding and also failed to get coal policy approved. "Regarding the gas block bidding and coal policy, definitely I have some frustrations... all these should have been done," he told reporters at his office room in the Energy Ministry. The educationist-turned functionary of the caretaker government voiced the frustration in his last briefing on the performance of the Power and Energy Ministry during the one year he served with the status of a State

Minister. Tamim, in his last day of office, also held a farewell meeting with the officials and employees of his ministry.Soon after talking charge on January 8, 2008, Tamim had announced that he would try to add at least 1000 MW power to the national grid while deals would be signed for another 3000 MW during his tenure. But both the target was miserably missed. Despite completion of all procedures, the government could neither sign an accord on the installation of 450 MW power plant at Bibiyana, nor sign deals on the 3rd round international gas block bidding.The post-1/11 caretaker government cancelled the Bibiyana tender and left the 3rd round bidding decision and also the coal policy approval for the next elected government. About the offshore bidding, Tamim said the tender was done fully in transparent manner and the proposed deals were better in any comparison with the previous deals. But, we didn't get positive response from the two major political parties. That's why the caretaker government is leaving the matter for the elected government." He suggested the new government not to make any more delay in taking decision on the issue of gas crisis. Because more delay will only prolong the crisis, he said. Tamim, however, claimed that he had tried to improve the gas supply situation in port city Chittagong and after his effort about 40 million cubic feet per day (MMCFD) of gas was added to the national grid. Of this, Chittagong city will get 10 MMCFD of gas which will improve the situation, he said, adding that a 50 MW power plant is being installed for the port city as well.He also said that about 170 MMCFD of gas would come to the national grid by the middle of the current year while about 500 MW power would be added to the national grid.

New govt begins journey

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the members of her cabinet assumed office on Wednesday after placing wreath at National Mausoleum marking the beginning of the functioning of her elected democratic government replacing the two-year emergency government. Attending her office yesterday morning, Sheikh Hasina along with new cabinet members, MPs, Chiefs of three Services of the Armed forces, Awami League senior leaders including Abdul Jalil, Tofail Ahmed, Amir Hossain Amu and Suranjit Sen Gupta went to Savar and placed wreaths at the National Mausoleum paying homage to the martyrs of the 1971 Liberation War.After assuming offices most of the newly appointed ministers sought cooperation from their respective staffs, employees and media in order to do their work smoothly. Most of the cabinet members yesterday attended their offices and talked to the officials and employees of their concerned ministries. They also expressed their willingness and firm determination to implement AL's election manifesto specially bringing down the skyrocketing price hike of essentials; maintaining law and order continuing discussion with neighbouring countries in order combat militancy and terrorism to restore peace and stability in South Asia.Abul Mal Abdul Muhit said if the businessmen do not reduce prices of essentials, the government will directly interfere in the market. In addition the government will subscribe and import essential commodities and sell those to the people. If required, the government will take initiative to dismantle the syndicated system of selling goods at high price.

Portfolios of ministers, state ministers	
Name	**Ministry**
Abul Maal Abdul Muhit	Finance
Begum Matia Chowdhury	Agriculture
Abdul Latif Siddiqui	Jute and Textiles
Barrister Shafique Ahmed	Law
Air Vice-Marshal (retd) AK Khandaker	Planning
Razi Uddin Ahmed Razu	Telecommunications
Adv Sahara Khatun	Home
Syed Ashraful Islam	LGRD
Eng Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain	Labor and Employment
Enamul Huq Mostafa Shaheed	Social Welfare
GM Qader	Civil Aviation and Tourism
Dilip Barua	Industries
Ramesh Chandra Sen	Water Resources
Lt. Col. (retd) Faruq Khan	Commerce
Nurul Islam Naheed	Education
Rezaul Karim Hira	Land
Abul Kalam Azad	Information
Dr Dipu Moni	Foreign Affairs
Dr Afsarul Amin	Shipping
Dr Abdur Razzak	Food and Disaster
AFM Ruhul Huq	Health and Family Welfare
Syed Abul Hossain	Communication
Abdul Latif Biswas	Fisheries and Livestock
State Ministers	
Adv Mustafizur Rahman	Forest and Environment
Capt (retd) ABM Tajul Islam	Liberation Welfare
Tanjim Ahmed Sohel Taj	State Minister for Home
Architect Yafez Osman	Science & Information Communication
Dr Hasan Mahmud	Home Affairs
Begum Munnujan Sufian	Labour
Dipankar Talukdar	Hill Tracts Affairs
Ahad Ali Sarker	Youth and Sports
Advisers	
HT Imam	
Dr. Mashiur Rahman	
Dr. Modasser Ali	
Dr. Alauddin Ahmed	

He said the government will also constitute a price commission for effective implementation of its plan to make essential food items available at cheaper rate to the people. In order to ensure food security, the government has a plan to make a separate budget for food alone.Agriculture Minister Matia Chowdhury said she will take step to reduce diesel price quickly to enable farmers to produce food at low cost in plenty of volume. Steps will also be taken to ensure adequate supply of fertiliser to farmers. She said instead of importing food from abroad, the government would rather give subsidy to farmers to produce more food locally and make the country self reliant in food. "It is better to give subsidy to our farmers than to import food in exchange for making payment to foreign exporters," she added.Home Minister Advocate Shahara Khatun said all steps that are required for peace and happiness in the country will be taken. Crime, extortion and extremism will be dealt with an iron hand. "Mere arrest and punishment of the criminals and extortionists are not enough, rather the godfathers behind them will be put behind bars," she said. The first female home minister in this sub-continent assured that no person will be harassed for being a member of the opposition political party. "I can assure you that after my taking responsibility of home ministry nobody will be arrested in furtherance of ulterior motive or no person will be harassed on the ground that

he/she is a supporter of an opposite political party," she said. LGRD Minister Syed Asraful Islam said the government will take steps for bringing war criminals to book. "Those who were against independence tried to destabilize all institutions of the country. Question leakage incidents in the PSC and universities took place many times to prevent meritorious students from holding important posts. They interfered in functioning of the judiciary and tarnished its image. Nepotism and politicization of state-run organizations would be stopped," he said.Replying to a query of welcoming new ministers by a section of employees of the secretariat with banners and slogans, he said "I vehemently oppose this practice. This is not a place for doing politics, rather it is place of work. We have come to this place on the basis of our quality and people's mandate but not somebody's mercy."He said, "We do not want to indulge in terrorism, extortion and violence, we have asked our supporters across the country to abstain from bringing out victory procession. Around 21,000 leaders and activists of Awami League were attacked during BNP-Jamaat regime. Ivy Rahman, SAMS Kibria, Ahsanullah Master and others were killed. But we are not going to retaliate."Commerce Minister Lt Col Farukh Khan (retd) said all steps will be taken to reduce price spiral of essentials. Meanwhile a sign of price fall is being witnessed. Syndicate, if detrimental to people, will be dismantled.Civil Aviation Minister GM Quader assured that Biman will be turned into a profitable organization. Besides, efforts will be taken to promote country's tourism sector. Labour and Employment and Expatriate Welfare Minister Engineer Khandaker Mosarraf Hossain said population will be turned into an apt work force. Steps will be taken to send more workers abroad with a target of increasing remittance from nine billion dollars to 20 billion dollars. Besides, good relation will be maintained with labour importing countries. Health Minister Prof Dr AFM Ruhul Haque assured reactivating community hospitals across the country and promotion of treatment in upazila and district level hospitals with more equipments and apparatus so that patients do not need to come to Dhaka for better treatment.Law Minister Shafique Ahmed urged the officials of his ministry to be proactive and sincere in making new laws. He said law ministry plays an important role by scrutinizing and approving laws of other ministries. " I shall take all steps to establish rule of law and good governance in the country. Efforts will be taken to create an effective judiciary in order to reduce backlogs of cases in the High Court and lower courts." He expressed his commitment to establish a separate secretariat to deal with the higher and lower judiciaries for effective implementation of the separation of the judiciary from the executive. Apart from this, facilities for the judges will be increased.

BTRC issues first NTTN licence to build “Digital Bangladesh”

In a bid to permit the private sector to develop, build, operate and maintain nationwide optical fiber telecommunication transmission network, Bangladesh Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (BTRC) handed over the first Nationwide Tele-communication Transmi-ssion Network (NTTN) license to Fiber @ Home Limited.The BTRC chairman Maj Gen Manzurul Alam (retd) handed over the license to Managing Director of Fiber @ Home Limi-ted Moynul Haque Siddiqi at a simple function at BTRC office on Wednesday. The BTRC chairman said providing NTTN license is the first step to build "Digital Bangladesh" by 2021, which was one of the electoral promises by the newly formed government led by Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina. "Once the NTTN is completely set up in the country, it will be providing a very high-speed broadband internet service to the people and is likely to open up many possibilities and services like Telecommunication operators, ISPs, cable TV operators," BTRC chairman said adding that "The NTTN is expected to

improve and enhance the current internet infrastructure in Bangladesh." "Presently Bangladesh lacks a nationwide network infrastructure for common use by operators. Without infrastructure development, it is very difficult to make information technology available to the doorsteps of the rural people. If we can spread infrastructure facilities across the country implementation of e-governance will be easier," the BTRC chairman added.He said with the completion of NTTN, rural people will get the telecommunication and internet network facilities to a greater extent. The BTRC chairman said it will stretch optical fiber network across the country through NTTN and gradually help remove the use of overhead cables in the cities and towns. As a result, separates network for each service provider will not be required. For this, operation and maintenance cost will come down significantly, which ultimately benefits the customers. Terming NTTN license as a milestone for the development of information technology in the country, Managing Director of Fiber @ Home Limited Moynul Haque Siddiqi said, it will take the nation towards prosperity.Siddiqi said that densely populated cities of the country will be brought under the network within six months and the facilities would reach at least 20 upazilas by next one year.BTRC officials said the NTTN license is an open license. The duration of the license will be initially for a term of 15 years. The licensee will need to submit a bank guarantee as security deposit worth Tk. 100 million in favour of BTRC within 15 days of issuance of license with minimum validity of five years.

Ninth parliament opens on January 25

The 9th Jatiya Sangsad will go into its inaugural session on January 25 at 3 pm marking the resumption of Parliamentary democracy after two-year of army backed emergency rule.President Iajuddin Ahmed on Thursday summoned the 9th parliament on January 25 (Sunday) at 3pm at the Parliament Complex. The President summoned the parliament into session in exercise of the authority bestowed upon him under the Article 72 (1) of the Bangladesh constitution.The first task to be taken up by the parliament at its inaugural session is the election of the speaker and the deputy speaker. As is the practice, the inaugural session of the parliament will be addressed by President Iajuddin Ahmed. It may be mentioned, the new parliament will elect the next President in the first session of the parliament to replace Iajuddin Ahmed. Some important bills will be tabled in the first session of the parliament session. These will include a bill on ratification of the ordinances promulgated during caretaker government rule and another one on trial of war criminal. The business Advisory Committee will sit before parliament goes into session to finalise the schedule of the upcoming session. Meanwhile, main opposition BNP-led four-party alliance has decided to join the first session of parliament.

Experts demand resolution of sea disputes

Considering the importance of our sea resources and development of lifestyle of coastal people, a separate ministry needs to be introduced, said experts at a press conference at the National Press Club on Friday."As the country's 90 percent export and import businesses are going through the seaports and about 3 crore people are living around coastal belts being directly or indirectly engaged in fishing and other professions relating to sea, the new government should introduce a new ministry considering the importance of sea resources," the experts said.Eminent educationist

Professor Sirajul Islam Chowdhury, Justice Gulam Rabbani, Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) President Manjurul Ahsan Khan, Economist Anu Mohammad, Dhaka University teacher Akmal Hossain, engineer Sheikh Muhammad Shahidullah, engineer Muhammad Inamul Haque and Commodore Mohammad Kurshed Alam attended the press conference.Sirajul Islam Chowdhury said, "I hope the newly elected government will set up a separate ministry for dealing with maritime resources. We expect the issue will be discussed in the parliament for identification of maritime belts for resolving the crisis. In the past, no governments were concerned over people's interest. None of those held fruitful discussion with India and Myanmar to resolve sea disputes." Anu Mohammad said, "The country has plenty of natural resources including oil and gas in the seabed but our maritime boundaries are yet to be identified. Our present government should take effective steps for delimitating exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and territorial sea area by discussing with India and Myanmar."

Jute, leather goods, handicrafts, household appliance attract visitor

Nine days into its inauguration, the 14th Dhaka International Trade Fair (DITF) 2009 on Friday experienced a huge number of visitors with participants expecting considerable turnout in the coming days. "As today is a holiday, the number of visitors may top one lakh," said a busy Mohsin Khan, a cashier of ticket counters. The huge rush of people causes traffic jam on Rokeya Sarani, leading to Sher-e-Bangla Nagar fair venue.Visitors are showing more interests in household appliance, jewellery, jute made goods, leather goods, winter cloths and handicrafts. Participants on Friday said both local and foreign visitors are buying fashionable jute bags, rug (satranji), and leather bags, besides handicrafts such as flower vases. Karupannya, a Rangpur-based rug maker, displays a wide range of rugs at the fair. Prices of the traditional items start from Tk 30 a piece. "The rugs are quite impressive for home decoration," Fatema Begum, a housewife, said while purchasing three pieces of rug at the fair. France, Italy, Germany and Spain are major importers of satranji, said a salesman of Karupannya. A salesman at Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC) stall said, "We have been selling products worth Tk 30 thousand to 40 thousand for the last two days as the fair is attracting more visitors."Alliance Bed Ware, a Dhaka-based bedware house, offers exclusive cushion, floor cushion and pillow covers at the fair. "We are very new in this business but we have already started exporting our products to Middle East and Australia," said SM Ali Reza, assistant general manager of the company. Salesmen at Leather Cottage, Bay Tanneries Ltd, Bay Emporium said they are getting good response from the visitors as the fair is gaining momentum.Some 467 local and foreign companies are displaying machinery, agriculture equipment, chemicals, allied products, cosmetics, dairy products, electrical and electronic items, food, tableware, melamine, plastic goods, handicrafts, furniture, home appliances, leather and leather goods, footwear, sports goods, building materials, textile and garment products in the fair.

Along with the Bangladeshi companies, 22 foreign companies from 12 countries that are India, Iran, Malaysia, Pakistan, Singapore, Thailand, Japan, Turkey, USA, China, Germany and United Arab Emirates (UAE) are showcasing their products.

Dipu Moni favours student politics

Foreign Minister Dr Dipu Moni has said that she is in favor of student politics, as all great achievements of Bangladesh owe a great deal to student politics. "Without the student politics, we will not get our future leaders," she said claiming herself as an example of student politics.The new Foreign minister made the comments while attending a TV programme 'First Minister' at the Tejgaon studio of Channel-i on Wednesday night. Dr Dipu Moni said that their government would work to open the doors of the world for the young generation. "We will create opportunities for the young generation as per our capabilities."She said that her ministry might welcome direct letters from the public, participating with their suggestions for fulfilling the Vision-2021 of the government. About the increased manpower export to the Middle-East, the Foreign Minister said that her ministry would do whatever is needed for "our expatriate workers to survive in better circumstances over there." Media personalities including Shykh Siraj, representatives of debate organisation NDFBD and a group of new voters were, among others, present when the programme was recorded at the Channel-i studio.

BNP will oppose restoration of 1972 constitution affecting its politics: Delwar

BNP Secretary General Khandaker Delwar Hossain on Saturday said if Awami League- led government tries to restore constitution of 1972 affecting politics of BNP or any public interest, BNP will protest such change through legal procedure. "We have come to know that Awami League led government is going to restore the constitution of 1972. If the new government tries to restore this constitution and it's any article goes against BNP-led four-party alliance or people's interest, we will protest against the step constitutionally," Khandaker Delwar Hossain told reporters in front of NAM flat residence in the capital yesterday.He said BNP will join the first session of parliament and the MPs-elect of BNP will also protest against the government move of legalizing many decisions of the caretaker government. "Awami League is going to legalise activities done by the caretaker government. I am expecting that our MPs-elect will protest these issues from their respective positions," Delwar said.He said all committees of BNP and its front organisation will be dissolved immediately and those will be reconstituted to bring back BNP's political strength. "On the basis of our party constitution, our union, upazila and district level committees will be reconstituted very soon through election across the country where BNP's grass-roots level activists and supporters will vote their leaders," he added.BNP has 11 front organisations -Chhatra Dal, Sramik Dal, Muktijodha Dal,

Samajik Sangsk-ritik Sangstha, Krishak Dal, Tati Dal Swechchashebak Dal, Olama and Matswajibi Dal. There is no union, upazila and district level committee of these organisations since long. It may be another cause of its defeat in the recent parliamentary election, the sou-rces said.While talking to The Bangladesh Today, BNP Vice-Chairman MK Anwar said a secret deal between Awami League and the caretaker government took place earlier. On the basis of the deal, the caretaker government had taken position in favour ofAwami League during general election. As per their terms and conditions, Awami League is bound to legalise the controversial steps of caretaker government. "After taking oath before the first session of the new parliament, we along with our 29 MPs-elect of BNP will strongly protest against government decisions if such decisions go against our constitution and public interest," MK Anwar said.Replying to a query about giving him the post of deputy speaker by the ruling party, he said "Soon after victory, AL leaders started attacks on BNP and its political alliance. Instead of reducing the attacks, several ministers are terming these attacks as BNP's internal conflict. Under these circumstances if they offer me deputy speaker post, I will tell them that I am not qualified enough to hold the post of their unilateral parliament," MK Anwar said.

US seeks to recover Coco 'bribe money'

The United States government has moved to recover funds worth US$3 million allegedly obtained by the younger son of former prime minister Khaleda Zia and kept with a Singapore-based bank, a top justice official has announced.
"The forfeiture action was filed January 8, 2009 in the US District Court in the District of Columbia against funds located in Singapore held by multiple account holders," a Justice Department statement said on Friday.
"The forfeiture complaint relates primarily to alleged bribes paid to Arafat "Coco" Rahman, the (younger) son of the former prime minister Khaleda Zia, in connection with public works projects awarded by the Bangladesh government to Siemens AG and China Harbor Engineering Company," the statement said.
"This action shows the lengths to which US law enforcement will go to recover the proceeds of foreign corruption, including acts of bribery and money laundering," said acting assistant attorney general Matthew Friedrich. According to the Justice Depart-ment, bribe payments from Sie-mens AG and China Harbor Engineering Company were made in US dollars, and the illicit funds flowed through financial institutions in the United States. They were later deposited in accounts in Singapore, thereby subjecting them to US jurisdiction, the Justice Department said.
"Not only will the Department, for example, prosecute companies and executives who violate the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, we will also use our forfeiture laws to recapture the illicit facilitating payments often used in such schemes," Friedrich said.
"According to the forfeiture complaint, the majority of funds in Coco's account are traceable to bribes allegedly received in connection with the China Harbor project,

(meant) to build a new mooring containment terminal at the port in Chittagong," the Justice Department statement said. Siemens Aktiengesellschaft (Siemens AG), a German corporation, and three of its subsidiaries pleaded guilty on December 15, 2008, to violations of and charges related to the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA). "Specifically, Siemens Bang-ladesh admitted that from May 2001 to August 2006, it caused corrupt payments of at least $5,319,839 to be made through purported business consultants to various Bangladeshi officials in exchange for favourable treatment during the bidding process on a mobile telephone project. "At least one payment to each of these purported consultants was paid from a US bank account," the department said. The department pointed out that money laundering laws in the United States cover "financial transactions that flow through the United States involving proceeds of foreign offences, including foreign bribery and extortion". In August 2006, president George W Bush announced a National Strategy to Interna-tionalise Efforts Against Klep-tocracy to fight high-level corruption around the world. This strategy combines the policy and law enforcement tools of several federal agencies, including the Depart-ments of Justice, Treasury, State and Homeland Security. The case was investigated by the FBI's Washington Field Office in cooperation with Bangladeshi law enforcers.

2000 Biman force-retired staffs demand reinstatement

Around 2000 employees of Bangladesh Biman who were sent on forced self-retirement have urged the newly elected government to reinstate them to the service."The authority compelled us to go to self retirement with an empty hand showing different causes. Besides, they threatened us at several times. We are the victims of the circumstances. If they don't fulfill our demand, we will commit suicide," the jobless employees said at a protest rally demanding reinstatement in front of Balaka Bhaban in the city yesterday.They alleged, "They were thrown out of employment on the plea of reducing manpower of Biman, but instead of reducing manpower, Biman's manpower has now been increased. What was then justification to send us home?" they alleged.Chairman of the Board of Director of Biman said that the authority already was informed about the matter. "We do hope we will be able to resolve the problem avoiding any untoward situation," he assured.Meanwhile, criminal syndicate at Zia International Airport has become very much active after two years. During the regime of emergency government, the criminals, cheats and organised thugs had gone into hiding but soon after taking power by the elected democratic government, they have started returning to ZIA and committing crimes. "The anomalies at the ZIA are still rampant despite different measures to protect the incoming and outgoing passengers from sufferings and to check trafficking of currency and gold by the Bangladesh Biman employees, customs officials, police, ansars, smugglers, transport workers, porters, sweepers and cheats," talking to this correspondent a section of officials alleged. Yesterday, Safiul Azam, Comm-unication Engineer of ZIA, was caught red handed while he was stealing away a laptop

computer from a passenger. The arrested person later was released due to pressure of his colleagues. Station Officer Shawkat Ali said that he was not present during incident." On thattime Commu-nication Engineer Safiul Azam was not assigned to discharge his duty. I heard the theft incident and informed it to concerned higher authority," he said.

Tanners eye good business from cheaper raw hide collection

The country's leather and footwear businesses aim to make a robust profit after collecting raw hides and skin at cheaper prices from the local market during the last month's Eid-ul-Azha festival, traders said.The businessmen are happy about the collection of raw hides and skin as they can procure their targeted quantity of around 3 lakh pieces at lower prices after the Eid."We are expecting benefit out of the cheaper prices of raw hides and skin collected from the local market," said President of Bangladesh Finished Leather Goods and Footwear Exporter's Association (BFLLGEA) Rezaul Karim Ansari. Ansari said the local businesses will launch special drives under the support of the association to expand market abroad.Businessmen collected local raw hides and skin at Tk 30-35 per square foot during the last month festival, which was half of the prices of the previous occasion.Seasonal businessmen, however, suffered huge loses this season as they purchased raw hides and skin at higher prices and had to sell at lower rates to the tanners.Bangladesh Tanners Association (BTA) and BFLLGEA have fixed the lower rates for raw hides and skin this year, which were around Tk 60-70 per square foot during the previous festival. The tanners collected around 60 per cent of total raw hides and skin at lower rates from the non-traditional businessmen.Three state-owned commercial banks sanctioned around Tk 3.0 billion to help tanners purchase raw hides and skin this year. "We had fixed the lower rates considering the downward trend in prices and demand of finished leather in the international market due to the global economic meltdown," BTA president Harun Chowdhury said. To reap the benefit of lower rates of raw hides and skin along with the opportunities of cheap labour and privileged market access a good number of international shoemaking companies are keenly working to purchase the country's small and medium size shoe making factories and establish joint ventures.Many global shoemakers are also relocating their factories to Bangladesh from other Asian countries like Hong Kong, China, Vietnam and Cambodia to have access to the country's abundant supply of quality leather.Bangladesh exports raw hides to Italy, Japan, Korea and China. Export figures stood at $284 million in 2007-08, and its target for the current fiscal is $ 304.32 million. Besides, Bangladesh also exported footwear worth $ 169.60 million, leather bags and purses worth $8.87 million in 2007-08 fiscal.

BNP terms the allegation against Coco motivated, fabricated

Ruling out the allegation of taking bribe brought against Arafat Rahman Coco by US Justice Department, BNP leaders on Sunday said it is motivated and fabricated in order to tarnish the image of late President Ziaur Rahman's family. Talking to The Bangladesh Today yesterday BNP Secretary General Khandaker Delwar Hossain, Standing Committee Member Lieutenant General Mahbubur Rahman

(retd) and Vice-Chairman MK Anwar said as part of conspiracy hatched at home and abroad, the allegation of taking bribe has been brought against Arafat Rahman Coco in a bid to destroy BNP's image politically."Conspirators at home and abroad are still involved in tarnishing the image of Zia's family. It is very surprising that Coco was arrested along with his mother BNP Chairperson and former Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia on September 3, 2007 but then he had not been charged in connection with bribery," BNP Secretary General said. Expressing grave disappointment, Mahbubur Rahman said such allegations against Arafat Rahman Coco, is really unfortunate and a matter of regret. "I don't know all the facts but I was disappointed to hear such allegation against the son of former President and Prime Minister," he added. However, he said the court will decide whether allegation brought against Coco, is true or false. MK Anwar said that he didn't hear of any allegation brought against Coco. "As I am yet to hear the allegation, I don't want to make any comment on this issue right now," he said It may be pointed out that US Department of Justice has recently moved to confiscate nearly $3 million from bank accounts in Singapore, which are allegedly linked to a bribery scandal in Bangladesh involving Arafat Rahman Coco, younger son of late President Ziaur Rahman and former premiere Khaleda Zia.

Hasina’s govt urged to establish rule of law

Different professional bodies on Sunday called upon the Sheikh Hasina led new government to establish the rule of law and democracy in order to fulfill people's cherished dream."We would like to see Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina establish the rule of law and give the democracy an institutional shape by fulfilling her election manifesto placed before the nation earlier," they made this call while addressing a discussion on 'Responsibility for Establishing Democracy and Rule of Law' held at the National Press Club yesterday.TIB Chairman Professor Muzaffer Ahmed, CPD Chairman Professor Rehman Subhan, former Education Minister Sheikh Shahidul Islam, Enam Ahmed Chowdhury, University teacher Humayun Kabir, Syed Abul Maksud and Badiul Alam Majumder took part in the discussion.Muzaffer said as per commitment Sheikh Hasina would have to make the parliament transparent, accountable and effective so that opposition leaders would be able to take part in the debate on various issues relating to people's welfare.
"As Sheikh Hasina before election had given commitment that if her party was voted to power, opposition would be offered the post of Deputy Speaker and chairmanship of different parliamentary standing committees, I hope she would implement her words and commitments," TIB Chairman said.He made a request to the Prime Minister to setup complaint cells at each ministry so that any person faces difficulties in getting due service, would be able to lodge complain against the concerned ministry. "If complaint cells are operated at every ministry, the rate of corruption would be reduced drastically. Simultaneously, people will be able to get service smoothly. If you (Hasina) want to give democracy an institutional shape, your

cabinet members' wealth and property statement will have to be disclosed before the nation to make them transparent and accountable," TIB Chief said."Our political government will have to give up the 'double standard' definition of democracy, otherwise, real democracy would not ever be established in the country," Muzaffer said.

Envoy Khairuzzaman to be 'recalled to face trial'

Bangladesh High Commissioner to Malaysia M Khairuzzaman, one of the original accused in the Bangabandhu murder case, will be recalled "to face trial in Bangladesh", says the state minister for foreign affairs. In an interview on Sunday, Hasan Mahmud told bdnews24.com that the ministry "had already discussed the issue of removing Khairuzzaman" who was made envoy by the 2001-2006 BNP-led government. "Awami League is in power now. It cannot be that Bangabandhu's killers will be serving as envoys," Mahmud said. "First, he will be called back and then he will have to face trial (here)," he said. "We have already discussed recalling him from the mission." Mahmud said the process to bring him back would start soon.Khairuzzaman, a retired major who was also charged but later acquitted in the Jail-Killing Case, has denied involvement in any of the killings.
He told bdnews24.com from Malaysia by phone: "I was abroad when Bangabandhu was murdered. I was not involved in the killing." Asked whether he was possibly resigning his post and returning home, he said: "I have not got any instruction from Dhaka." Soon after the last BNP-led alliance government assumed power, Khairuzzaman was shifted from jail to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University hospital and then released on bail. On May 4, 2003 he was reinstated as a key director general in the foreign ministry and later promoted as additional secretary. Khairuzzaman was later acquitted in the Jail Killing Case by a trial court in 2004. The Bangabandhu murder case is still pending appeals in the upper court.

BNP extends support for trial of war criminals

BNP Secretary General Khandoker Delwar Hossain on Friday extended his party's support to the move to ensure the trial of war criminals and categorically said the war criminals will have to be brought to book under the country's law and constitution."The legal course of action by the court will have to be taken against those who were actually involved in war crimes during liberation war and the charges

should be made on authentic information and evidence. If any action is taken indiscriminately against war criminals with political motive, it will be regrettable," Delwar told reporters at his Nam flat residence in the city yesterday. Talking to this Correspondent BNP Vice-chairman MK Anwar and Joint Secretary General Begum Selima Rahman outspokenly and simultaneously said the step taken by the ruling party to ensure the trial of war criminals is supportable. "This move to bring war criminals before the court should not be implemented with political motive and serve any vested quarters' interest; that will have to be ensured by the ruling party. To establish the rule of law, not only war criminals, all criminals who are committing various crimes throughout the country should be punished," they said.Begum Selima Rahman said the long desire of the countrymen is to ensure the trial of war criminals under the country's law. "If anyone is accused for war crimes erratically and convicted by the court as war criminal without authentic evidence in order to serve any political party's interest intentionally, it will be another crime and not be acceptable by the people of the country."Khandoker Delwar called upon incumbent Speaker to resolve the crises created centering seats issue in the parliament and accept BNP lawmakers' demand immediately. He also said the party high-ups have already decided to re-shuffle all it's organizing bodies throughout the country to strengthen the party.Responding to a query, Anwar said that in the meantime, they have met with the Speaker and demanded three more seats in the front row of the parliament. "We are eagerly waiting for the Speakers' right decision on the issue. If our demands are not fulfilled properly, we further will decide whether we will join parliament or not," MK Anwar added.

Bishwa Ijtema begins amid unprecedented security

Bishwa Ijtema, the religious gathering of Muslims Ummah from around the world began at Tongi on the outskirts of the capital amid tight security measures on Friday. Organised by Tablig Jamaat on the bank of the river Turag in Gazipur district, the event is being attended by around three million Muslims including around one lakh women. People from at least 70 foreign countries are participating in the three-day congregation that will come to an end with the final prayer "Akheri Munajat" on Sunday.According the sources, the Ijtema started formally after Jumma prayer. The religious sermons have already started. All sorts of stringent security measures have been taken by the authority to avert any untoward situation. Apart from this, preparation including provision for electricity, drinking water, and toilet facilities has been made for the devotees on the 160 acres of land.Different social and religious organisations have set up charitable dispensaries to provide free medical facilities to the devotees round the clock. Around 50 medical teams along with a good numbers of sanitation teams are working in the Ijtema area. The Tongi Hospital has been equipped with additional facilities to ensure treatment facilities for the devotees.On the other hand, huge contingent of law enforcers from different law enforcing agencies have been deployed to maintain law and order and avert any untoward

situation. Abdul Baten superintendent of police of Gazipur district said around 8700 police including high officials, 100 BDR and 860 Armed Police Battalion have been keeping close watch at every strategic points in and around the area.

New policy in offing for practical knowledge based studies

Awami League led government is set to adopt a new education policy to transform students into a technical based efficient and economically knowledgeable workforce. As part of "vision 2021" and "charter for change" as enumerated in its poll manifesto, the government has recorded statements of renowned academicians setting forth substances of their recommendations to change current education system which remains stereotyped for long.Talking to The Bangladesh Today, Education Secretary Syed Ataur Rahman said "To implement the above plan of developing education sector, the Education Minister held a meeting with renowned academicians of various universities and recorded their opinions."The government is also underlining the need for a unified education system for the primary and higher secondary levels where there will be no discrimination in offering education through English, Bengali and Arabic medium schools and colleges, he said.Meanwhile, Joint Secretary Mainuddin Khandker expressed the government's plan for promoting ICT and other technology based education for implementing its vision for a digital Bangladesh."Focal point of this government's education plan is that students will not be educated to work at the A/C room in the high-rise buildings, rather they will be educated technologically to work in the field for the development of the country," he said.Classifying government policy under three heads: long-term, mid-term and short-term, he said under long term policy, the education will be based on science, secularism and economics to create a science based, economically viable and secular new generation. "A unified education system will be introduced to remove difference between English, Bengali and Arabic medium studies. Currently mindsets of students under three categories of education are not same. Militancy is being encouraged among madrassa students while English medium students are alienated from social norms and morals. So, the unified education plan will bring all the foregoing categories of studies under an umbrella where students will be imparted knowledge of economics, science, law, English and morality which are important for life," he added. An effort to remove all superstitions and medieval beliefs from the students' minds and make them knowledgeable about the modern world will be taken. The education will be designed in such a way that all corruption, inconsistence and self-centeredness will be removed from the society, he said adding "As vested interest group always create obstacles to the way of development, the education schedule will be prepared taking into account the need to prevent vested interest groups taking advantage of the system."

Political committee to face recession-effect to be in place anytime, awaits cabinet nod

Finance Minister AMA Muhith on Friday said the proposed high-powered political committee would be in place anytime now to face the possible affects of the global recession on the country's economy."It'll be there anytime. It's awaiting cabinet approval," he told reporters on the sidelines of a 3-day Bangladesh Chemical Congress that began on Friday morning at the auditorium of Teacher-Student Centre (TSC) of Dhaka University.On January 21, Muhith said the government would announce the committee within 15 days.As per the proposal, the Finance Minister would head the committee to be represented by political leaders, trade body leaders and stakeholders of trade, industry, business and the economy to keep close watch on the affects of the financial crisis and take remedial measures. However, he did not elaborate the detailed structure of the committee that would have the authority to take instant decision to face any emerging challenges.Earlier, Muhith told reporters that he would invite representation even from the opposition political parties.The task force of officials formed earlier in this regard would work side by side while the Bangladesh Better Business Forum (BBBF) would continue to function.
As per the expert opinions so far, the issues of concern that deserve close attention by the proposed committee would include the impact mainly on the country's exports and remittance inflow.Bangladesh Bank Quarterly Report released on Thursday recommended close watchon the impact of global recession on the country's exports and wage earners' remittance while it stressed the need for looking further the exchange rate situation of Bangladesh taking into consideration the adjustment of currencies in the neighbouring and competitor countries.Experts and trade bodies so far suggested possible mechanisms to face the challenge would be to reduce lending rates to a tolerable level particularly for the export-oriented and manufacturing sectors, and keeping exchange rate stable and competitive.Other possible measures would be giving priority to agriculture, industry and services sectors while considering bank loans instead of trade financing, restricting public borrowing from the banking system and bringing transparency in the capital market.As per the proposed working process of the political committee, the stakeholders would bring up the issues (of concern) like interest rate and exchange rate at the committee, which would take remedial measures accordingly. Addressing the congress, the Finance Minister said the condition of safe drinking water has been better in Bangladesh, but worsened in many ways to contaminate.

Call to raise RMG incentive to 15 per cent from 5 per cent

Leaders of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and Bangladesh Knitwear Manu-facturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) have urged the government to raise cash incentive in Ready Made Garment (RMG) sector to 15 per cent from existing 5 per cent to face the adverse effect of the global meltdown.Talking to The Bangladesh Today, the industry people said all US and EU apparel importers, hit hard by financial crisis, are pressuring for price cuts. So, they urge the government to make a contingency support package.Pointing out the Indian and Chinese suppliers who are backed up by huge devaluation of their currency, RMG manufacturers also said an immediate action plan is needed to save the country largest export earning sector.Mohd, S Salam, BGMEA 1st vice-president said, "There has been an adverse effect of the current global economic downturn for last couple of the months and if we fail to provide enough assistance to this huge industry, it will

be difficult for the industry to sustain, So on an emergency basis, the government should raise cash incentives to 15 per cent soon. If this industry is hard hit by the global economic recession, many owners will be compelled to shut down their industries and hundreds of people will lose their jobs."He also laid emphasise on formation of a committee with the participation of all stakeholders concerned to press home their demands before the government to implement a comprehensive plan to save the industry. "Due to continuous economic slowdown, jute and shrimp industry have been facing a serious set back and this happened due to failure of government to take necessary steps."

Govt to compensate affected people at Baropukuria for uninterrupted coal exploration

The government is going to permanently settle the issue of public suffering and compensate their land subsidence due to coal exploration at the Baropukuria coalmine.At a press conference on Thursday, Advocate Shamsul Haque Tuku, State Minister for Power, Energy and Mineral Resources said "For the interest of uninterrupted coal exploration, the government is going to mitigate public suffering and compensate their land subsidence caused by coal exploration at the Baropukuria coalmine in Bogra."He said overall development in all sectors depends on power and production of power largely depends on coal as there no other suitable alternative source of energy in the country."We are to rely on coal for generation of electricity which is needed for mills, industries and overall development in all sectors. So there is no alternative to exploration of coal to be used for power generation," he said.He said soon after assuming office by Awami League led government, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina who is in charge of power and energy ministry held meeting with all concerned high ups and instructed them to take necessary steps for increasing power by setting up new power plants. In this regard, she urged officials to explore new gas or coal mines and increase exploration of coal and gas from existing mines. "As per instruction of the Prime Minister we visited Baropukuria coalmine area on January 27 to examine the land subsidence and public suffering therein due to coal exploration. We talked to the affected people, examined the present and future detrimental effect on land and estimated the volume and nature of land collapse there. But compensation and rehabilitation will be finalised on the basis of recommendations to be given by the representatives of the local affected people," he added.State Minister for Forest and Environment Mustafizur Rahman said "As I was elected MP from Baropukuria area, I have been seeing suffering of the local people. Residential and commercial houses have collapsed and no crops are growing due to land subsidence. During our recent visit, we asked local people to form a committee of around 20 persons taking two/ three from each village and suggest measure and finally the PM will sit with the committee members to finalise their compensation."

Opposition BNP remains absent in JS

Stalemate centering the seat rearrangement in the first session of the ninth Parliament still persists as the main opposition BNP, which staged a walkout on Wednesday, did not return for yesterday (Thursday) session.Although the Speaker of the Parliament Abdul Hamid held a meeting with the BNP-led Opposition from 11:30am to 1.00 pm yesterday, no tangible result has come out yet in this regard.Talking to newsmen, Opposition Whip Zainul Abedin Faruk said, "We placed our demand before the Speaker during the meeting. Now we will wait for the decision of him till Sunday. If no positive reply is received within this stipulated timeframe, we would take our party's decision after the Opposition's Parliamentary meeting on the day."The Speaker rearranged the seating plan proportionately. In the new seat plan, some four seats in the front row on the left-side of the Speaker were allocated for the opposition. Some ruling party lawmakers- Industries Minister Dilip Barua, Rashed Khan Menon, Hasanul Haque Inu, Mojibur Rahman, and Colonel (retd) Oli Ahmed were allowed to seat along with four other BNP leaders including Party Chief Khaleda Zia on the left row. The immediate-past speaker Jamiruddin Sircar, who presided over the inaugural sitting of the session on Sunday, allocated 10 out of the 29 seats of the front row to the opposition bench.Meanwhile, in absence of the Speaker, the Deputy Speaker Col (retd) Shawakat Ali conducted the question and answer session in the afternoon. Health and Family Affairs Minister Dr AFM Ruhul Haque and Water Resources Minister Doctor Afsarul Amin replied to some queries of the lawmakers.Replying to a query Dr AFM Ruhul Haque informed the parliament that the government has a plan to recruit physicians for some 6931 vacancies through arranging a special BCS (Doctors) to fulfill the requirements."In order to ensure better treatment for the masses specially for the rural people, the AL-led Grand Alliance Government has plan to resume the services of some 13,500 community clinics for people across the country," he continued, "Of them, the infrastructures of some 10,723 clinics have already been completed. All sorts of logistic and other support will be provided in phases and the authorities concerned started working on this."

Real state business faces setback for lack of proper rules

Real Estate and Housing business continues to face severe setback in absence of proper guidelines in this sector and mistaken plans of the Ministry of Public Works and Housing as well as RAJUK. To The Bangladesh Today, REHAB President Tanveerul Haque Probal said "There is no initiative to ensuring necessary facilities for landowners and buyers of apartments to protect this business. So, the government needs to monitor the real estate sector, by establishing a monitoring cell and enact new laws providing for urbanisation in a planned way. In absence of proper rules and regulations, thousands of complaints from the buyers are regularly being lodged against developers and vice versa without any action"He said the real estate and housing business had faced a critical situation during the immediate past caretaker

government. At that time, there was no business in this sector as the prices of construction materials were abnormally high. But soon after forming an elected government, the real estate business is trying rashest again. "We will propose the government for sanctioning loan for the buyers and developers as per their needs within a short time," Tanveerul Haque Probal said. About possible sale this year, the president said REHAB is expecting to exceed last year's sale amounting to Tk 200-250 crore.Replying to a query, he said the developers are facing scarcity of land and suitable location for urbanisation in planned way. "We have already started REHAB fair in Chittagaong on Thursday and the fair in Rajshahi and Sylhet will be arranged within two years to attract buyers and landowners," the president said.

Agreement signed for preparing design of PMBP

Bangladesh on Thursday inked an agreement with a New Zealand consultancy firm to prepare a detailed design of the Padma Multipurpose Bridge Project (PMBP). Md Rafiqul Islam, director of Padma Multipurpose Bridge Project and Greg Klamus, director of Infrastructure of Maunsell Limited of New Zealand, signed the agreement on behalf of their respective sides. The signing ceremony was held at 'Setu Bhaban' in presence of Communications Minister Syed Abul Hossain. Secretary of Bridge Division CQA Mushtaque Ahmed and representatives from development partners like Asian Development Bank, World Bank and JIBC were present. Besides, a panel of experts comprising Prof Jamilur Reza Chowdhury, Prof AMM Shafiu-llah, Dr Ainun Nishat, Prof Alamgir Mojibul Haque, Prof M Feroz Ahmed, Prof Mohammed Abdur Rouf and high officials of the Bridge Division and Communications Ministry were present on the occasion.The designing of the bridge will cost Tk 131 crore. The signing ceremony over, Syed Abul Hossain told the journalists that the construction of the Padma Bridge would be completed during the tenure of the present government Inshallah. The agreement was signed within the 22nd working day of the present government.The cost of the bridge has initially been estimated at Tk 10,161.75 crore. The length of main bridge is 5.58 kilometres and width 25 metres with four lanes. The bridge has the provision of railway line in the middle.World Bank, Asian Develop-ment Bank, JBIC and Islamic Development Bank will provide fund for the project.

Smuggling of non-urea fertiliser into Bangladesh continues
Prices of Indian fertilizers lesser

Though the prices of non-urea fertilizers have been reduced by the government, the smuggling of those fertilizers into Bangladesh are going on unabated through various borders of Rajshahi and the farmers of the district are applying those smuggled fertilisers in their fields.It is learnt, during the last couple of days, Godagari thana

and Premtoli outstation Police recovered a huge quantity of smuggled Indian fertilisers from various places of the upazila. Most of those fertilisers were recovered while those were being transported by farmers through Nasimun and through rickshaw vans from Bidirpur and Kadam Sahar areas of the upazila.Sources said, a huge quantity of non- urea fertilisers including DAP (di-Ammonium Phosphate) and TSP (Triple Super Phosphate) are being smuggled into the country through various borders of Godagari. Farmers from Char Asariadaha, a frontier union, informed, they are not using Bangladeshi fertilisers because those are still nearly double of the price, even after re-fixation, and still those are not available with the local dealers.They informed, the Navaratna brand DAP of India are available at taka 1,800 per sack at the char villages but it is being sold at taka 2,200 per sac at various hats and markets across the char areas while the TATA brand fertilizer is being sold at taka 2,500 to 2,600 per sac at various places of the upazila.Local people, however, expressed adverse reactions at the unabated smuggling of fertilizer through various borders of the upazila. They said, week ago, the BDR officials organised meetings with the people of various bordering villages to check smuggling of fertilizer but practically no pragmatic measure has been taken to stop the smuggling of the fertilizer to and from the country.They also complained, at this full season of boro paddy transplanting, the supply of Bangladeshi DAP is not available with the dealers of Godagari, that is why, finding no other ways, the farmers are using smuggled Indian DAP. They also said, despite re-fixation of the fertiliser price, the price of Indian fertilisers is far below than the price line thereof in Bangladeshi, and it is unlikely that the smuggling of fertiliser from India will be abated. They demanded further reduction of price of Bangladeshi fertilisers.

32,500 children working in ship breaking industry

Staff Correspondent

About one lakh 30 thousand workers are directly or indirectly involved in ship breaking industry in Bangladesh. Of these workers, one-fourth is children.

This was revealed at a function titled 'Child breaking Yard: Child Labor on Risky Ship breaking Industry in Bangladesh' at the Dhaka Reporters Unity (DRU) on Wednesday.

Speaking on the occasion Professor Mozaffer Ahmad said, "We made some recommendations to the government for setting up a special zone for ship building and breaking industry. The government accepted the recommendations but we didn't see its implementation."

Mohammed Ali Shahin, who works with non-governmental ship-breaking organisation (YPSA), presented the report and said official figures show that 15 workers died in Bangladeshi ship yards in the years of 2008 and some 18 died in 2007.

He said the owners of the industries did not provide sufficient safety materials to the workers. As a result they have to work at risk. On the other hand, the workers do not get the facilities of health insurance. The workers have no job contract with the

owners. "If any worker dies, owner or contractor does not want to take the responsibility," he said.
"According to ILO, ship breaking is the most hazardous job in the world. But the owners did not provide enough compensations to the families of victims who died in the last few years," he said.

Two new EPZs as investment flows increase

Staff Correspondent

Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority (BEPZA) is expecting to attract more investments in the country's Export Processing Zones (EPZs) as it has received positive signals from the newly elected Awami League (AL) government to go for expansion, officials said.
They said the government has already approved one of their two proposals for setting up EPZs and they have already received approval for Feni EPZ, but the approval of Meghna EPZ is under process.
When Feni and Meghna are set up, the total number of such zones will reach 10.
Now the country has eight EPZs in Uttara (Nilphamari), Ishwardi, Adamjee, Mongla, Dhaka, Comilla, Chittagong and Karnaphuli.
"We have received approval from the government for establishing the Feni EPZ, but no decisions have yet been taken about the Meghna EPZ. Hopefully, we will receive it soon." said a high official.
Officials said the BEPZA is looking to go for extension as there is positive mood among both local and foreign

ECNEC approves 7 projects of Tk 546 crore

PM asks for all out efforts by authorities to reduce crime

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Tuesday asked the authorities concerned to make all out efforts to reduce crime in the country as she approved a police development project.
She gave the directive at a meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (ECNEC) at NEC conference room, approving the National Crime and Operation Monitoring Centre project to be constructed in the capital at a cost of Tk 59 crore.
The ECNEC meeting, with the Prime Minister in the chair, approved seven projects of Tk 546 crore, including Japanese Debt Cancellation Fund of Tk 139 crore and project aid of Tk 32 crore.
"She (PM) does not support crime by anyone, whoever s/he is," Planning Minister Air Vice Marshall (Retd) AK Khandaker told a press briefing after the meeting.
Replying to a question, he said the Centre to be constructed with Japanese Debt

Cancellation Fund would facilitate police to detect criminal activities particularly related to drug, money laundering and cyber crime as well as to monitor police operations against crime.
Other projects approved were strengthening mushroom development project (Tk 50 crore), construction of Dhaleswari bridge in Tangail (Tk 108 crore), Rangpur district road development project (Tk 155 crore), construction of 12 administrative building-cum-barrack at newly approved police stations (Tk 59 crore), second phase of drinking water supply from deep tube-well under Barind project (Tk 99 crore) and construction of 50-bed BDR Hospital in Satkania, Chittagong (Tk 45 crore).
ECNEC alternative chairman and Finance Minister AMA Muhit, other ministers and state ministers, and senior officials concerned were present at the meeting.

New policy soon to revitalize rural, agro economy

Staff Correspondent
The government is going to initiate a new agricultural policy with a view to ensuring food sufficiency and revitalizing rural and agricultural economy.
According to sources, concerned officials at the Ministry of Agriculture are working on preparation of a comprehensive agro policy in order to make the country food sufficient and eliminate poverty of the gross-roots people.
Talking to The Bangladesh Today, expressing anonymity a high-up at the ministry said the detailed specifications of the new policy have not been finalised yet but they will include policies for producing fertiliser locally, reducing reliance on chemical fertilisers, enhancing use of decomposed organic fertilisers, adequate supply of electricity and diesel, promoting irrigation system, inventing hybrid seeds, giving subsidy in fertiliser and diesel.
"We have sent a different kind of fertiliser Urea Deep Placement (UDP) to 230 upazilas to be used instead of powdered urea. 80 percent UDP works as 100 percent urea saving 20 percent but increases 30 percent agricultural products. GoB and USAID are jointly working to introduce this fertiliser in all parts of the country," he said.
He said as every year demand for organic fertilisers is increasing, 10 tons of decomposed fertilisers made of human waste, rotten trees and herbs to be used as experiment under the demonstration projects.
To promote rural economy specially in the "monga" stricken areas of northern districts, the government is going to implement '100 A Employment Formula' project under which every poor person will get Tk 100 in exchange for a day's work. Besides, a new kind of rice will be planted in those areas and this can be harvested earlier than the usual season so that people of monga areas will not be unemployed in the month of Kartik, he said.
Apart from these, a new project named National Agricultural Technology Policy (NATP) is going to be implemented under the financial assistance of USAID and just one week ago expert Dr Abdur Razzak was appointed as project head to start functioning.

Bills to elect Dy Speaker, JS committees, reserved women seats likely to be tabled

BNP to oppose 20 of 122 ordinances

Staff Correspondent

The AL-led Grand Alliance Government is likely to table some important bills - including an amendment bill to elect a Deputy Speaker from the opposition, selection of MPs in reserved seats, formation of all parliamentary committees in ongoing session of the ninth parliament.

The ongoing parliament session - that resumes at 4:45pm today (Wednesday)-- would face strong debate on some 122 ordinances, promulgated by Caretaker Government, earlier tabled in its inaugural session on Saturday.

As per the Article 93(2) of the Constitution the Minister for Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Barrister Shafique Ahmed tabled the ordinances in the inaugural session.

According to sources, the Expert Committee headed by former Attorney General Barrister Rafiqul Haque earlier expressed their opinions to ratify about some 39 ordinances of the previous regimes.

Asked about these ordinances out of 122, concerned ministry and even two other ministers replied in the negative saying, "It's should not be made public at this moment."

Talking to The Bangladesh Today, a state minister, preferring anonymity said, priority would be given to the ordinances to the election, budget and finance in ratifying those in the parliament.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) expressed different opinions about some 20 ordinances placed before the JS in the inaugural session.

BNP leader Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury said that they would oppose those ordinances, promulgated earlier beyond their jurisdiction.

"We would take opposite stand against at least 20 ordinances of the 122, which are detrimental to the country," he said giving an instance like a number of ordinances including the Local Government (Upazila Parishad) (Amendment) Ordinance 2008.

Finance, budget and election ordinances to be given priority in ratification

Staff Correspondent

122 ordinances promulgated by the caretaker government are set to be ratified soon by the 9th parliament on the basis of priority, importance and their legal footings.

Talking to The Bangladesh Today, Law Minister Barrister Shafique Ahmed said

Monday "The ordinances made by the caretaker government are likely to be approved by the parliament basing on priorities. After approval of the JS, the ratified ordinances will be placed on par with law."
He said after having been placed before the parliament on January 25, the ordinances have become a property of the House which has absolute discretion to accept or reject those subject to their legal footings.
About conditions of priority, Law Minister said priorities will be attached to the ordinances relating to the election, budget and finance in ratifying those in the parliament.
He clarified procedures saying that although the ordinances have been already tabled with the parliament, those need to be examined by a parliamentary committee to determine as to which ordinances should be ratified and which not. After being recommended by the parliamentary committee, the ordinances will be placed before the parliament again to be approved.
However, he said priority is the only thing which will regulate the criterion as to which ordinances will be ratified, rather all ordinances will be ratified on the basis of their importance.
Earlier, a committee was formed comprising Barrister Rafiqul Haque, Dr M Zahir, Barrister Ajmalul Hossain QC, Barrister Fazle Noor Tapos to examine the merit of each ordinance. They sat several times with the Law Minister at his ministry.

AL ‘reformists’ to be evaluated in various aspects

Work for 47 Parliamentary committees going on

Staff Correspondent

Awami League leaders, deprived of getting different portfolios in the incumbent cabinet, would be evaluated in various aspects. Some mid-level AL lawmakers might be included in some 47 Parliamentary Committees likely to be raised in the adjourned session of the Jatiya Sangsad tomorrow (Wednesday).
The upcoming session will discuss about some 122 ordinances - earlier approved by the erstwhile Caretaker Government and discussion on the speeches of President Prof Iajuddin Ahmed, delivered on the inaugural session on Sunday evening.
Talking to The Bangladesh Today, Dhirentra Debnath Shambhu, one of the panel members of the Parliament, said, "The work for forming different Parliamentary Committees is going on in full swing. Formation of committees would be completed in phases."
Earlier, panel of Presidents and Parliamentary Working Committee were formed on Sunday. Considering outstanding contributions, AL high-up had shown due honour to some senior leaders, even reformists' ones in the inaugural session in JS, sources said.
Some AL senior MPs -Sajeda Chowdhury, Tofail Ahmed, Sheikh Fazlul Karim Selim - were given seats even in the Treasury Bench while so-called 'reformists'-Amir Hossain Amu, Abdur Razzak and Abdul Jalil were seen in the front at another row in

the parliament. Meanwhile, many influential ministers were allowed to sit in the back bench.
On the other hand, names of Sajeda Chowdhury, Tofail Ahmed, Sheikh Selim, Suranjit Sengupta, Abdul Matin Khasru, Advocate Rahmatullah and Rashed Khan Menon belong to the AL-led Grand Alliance were included in the 15-member Parliamentary Working Committee.
Most of the senior leaders - with mentionable previous political background - might be assigned to revitalise political activities of the party, said another source adding "Hectic lobbying is going on centering some 47 Parliamentary Committees likely to be constituted as priority basis. Initially some 39 committees would be formed."

Country's market-system destroyed in last 7 years: Faruk Khan

Market monitoring strengthened to control price hike, he says

UNB, Dhaka

Commerce Minister Lt Col (Retd) Faruk Khan on Monday said the country's market system has been totally destroyed over the last seven years and the present government will have to work hard to restore discipline in the market, freeing it of extortionists and musclemen.
"Market monitoring has been strengthened further with new strategies to control unnecessary price-hike," he told a group of journalists after inaugurating the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC) Local Network in Bangladesh at Hotel Sheraton in the morning.
The Commerce Minister said: "Only 15 days have passed since we came to power. People will soon realise the changes in market system, being reformed to remove people's miseries."
Replying to a question, he said price of edible oil has already come down in wholesale markets and its impact on retail markets will soon be visible within next couple of days.
"Give us time. We're applying all possible techniques to keep prices of essentials within the purchasing capacity of commoners," Faruk Khan said. "Prices of all essential commodities are gradually coming down in the market."
He informed that they have assigned Bangladesh Foreign Trade Institute (BFTI) to monitor international markets to help keep prices of essentials reasonable in the local market.

Govt to import 13 lakh tonnes crude oil, 1.5 lakh tonnes urea

BSS, Dhaka

The government on Monday decided to buy 13 lakh tonnes of crude oil and one and a half lakh tonnes of urea fertiliser to meet the domestic demands.
Cabinet committee on purchase took the decision at a meeting held at Bangladesh secretariat. Finance Minister and convener of the committee AMA Muhith presided over the meeting.
Briefing reporters after the meeting, Muhith said the country is having enough urea in stock. There is no urea crisis in the country as the authorities are maintaining enough stock on previous imports.
He said the cabinet committee has therefore lent permission to import one and a half lakh tonnes of urea to maintain a reasonable stock to avoid unforeseen shortfall. He said the imported urea will reach the country by March next.
On crude oil import for 2009, the Finance Minister said the government will buy light crude oil from Aramco of Saudi Arabia. Some other crude oil will come from Abu Dhabi, he said.
Agriculture Minister Matia Chowdhury, Planning Minister Air Vice Marshall (Retd) AK Khondker, Commerce Minister M Faruk Khan, Communication Minister Syed Abul Hossain were present in the meeting.
Cabinet secretary Abdul Aziz and the secretaries of the concerned ministries were also present.

Nearly 45 ordinances to be placed in inaugural session of parliament

Law Minister speaks on TAC, Judiciary

Staff Correspondent

Nearly 45 ordinances out of 122 promulgated by the caretaker government are expected to come up in the form of bill for consideration during maiden session of the parliament slated for January 25.
"A committee comprising senior lawyers examined all the ordinances promulgated during the caretaker government and gave their opinions as to which ordinances should be approved by the parliament. On the basis of their recommendations, the law ministry has selected 45 ordinances mostly relating to election and finance to be placed before the first session of parliament in the form of bill," Law Minister Barrister Shafique Ahmed said at a weekly press briefing on Thursday.
He said much talked about TAC ordinance will not be placed before the parliament because a case challenging it is pending with the Appellate Division and final decision will be taken only after the court verdict.
About the fate of clemency receivers, he said "Their future is uncertain yet and it will be determined only after the SC verdict because the tenure of TAC ordinance has already elapsed. As the matter is sub-judice, law will take its own course."

Holding of local polls on party-basis under consideration: AL

LGRD Minister satisfied on UZ polls atmosphere

Staff Correspondent

Awami League Spokesman and LGRD Minister Syed Ashraful Islam on Thursday said that holding of Upazila Parishad election on party basis is under their consideration.
"The Election Commission tired to depoliticize Bangladesh earlier. Election to the local government without political identity won't bring any good results," he observed adding, "Many countries - including US, European countries and neighbouring India - hold the local government elections with their respective political identity. I think, this poll should be held on political basis in Bangladesh and members of the parliament (MPs) would take decision in this regard."
Addressing a press conference at Dhanmondi AL office in the capital yesterday evening, the AL spokesperson also claimed that the upazila polls were held peacefully except for some stray incidents across the country.
"Our government provided all-out cooperation to the EC for smooth-holding of the elections. Normalcy prevailed throughout the country during polls. Law and order situation was very satisfactory. Reported clashes in some areas across the country are only local disputes as such polls to the local government is legally a non-political election," he continued, "There is no direct involvement of the political parties. AL didn't use their election symbol and the BNP didn't do so either."

BGMEA urges govt to introduce rationing systems for workers

Staff Correspondent

BGMEA leaders on Thursday urged the government to introduce rationing or VGF card system for the garments workers.
"If rationing or VGF card system is introduced for the workers, their suffering would be reduced. As a result they will be able to work at their respective industries and factories with enthusiasm. It will also bring positive result in the garment sector," after a meeting with Finance Minister Abul Mal Abdul Muhit at Secretariat, BGMEA President Anwar-ul-Alam Chowdhury told journalists.
He said that BGMEA leaders requested the Finance Minister for giving instruction to the banks to execute the decision taken by the caretaker government in order to exempt 270 sick industries from paying cost of fund immediately.
"During the discussion, we also informed the Finance Minister that the garments industries have been facing various problems as the price rate of garment products are declining day by day. To overcome such situation, we also requested him to take some specific policy like export performance benefit scheme or research and development fund scheme. Besides, we called upon the government to reduce bank interest rate, develop infrastructure, ensure smooth supply of gas and electricity, construct the Dhaka-Chittagong express way and make Mongla port functional for the overall development of the country's vital sector," BGMEA President said.
He also said the government should set up 'garments village' as soon as possible.
"As ECNEC is considering implementing 'garments village', the government will have

to execute the decision immediately. The Finance Minister assured us that all sorts of initiative will be taken to develop this important sector," Anwar-ul-Alam Chowdhury said.
He said if the government ensures a favourable atmosphere for the garments sector providing all sorts of assistance, this sector will be able to upgrade its export income up to 25 billion dollar by 2013 and create employment opportunity for around one million every year.

DFID assures Bangladesh of enhanced financial assistance

UNB, Dhaka

Visiting DFID director general Mark Lowcock on Thursday assured Bangladesh of continued and enhanced level of financial assistance as the British development agency was finalizing their assistance plan for the country for next few years.
The DFID assurance came when Lowcock made a courtesy call on Foreign Minister Dr Dipu Moni at her office. British High Commissioner in Dhaka Stephen Evans and DFID head in Bangladesh Cris Austin were present.
During the meeting, views were exchanged on British assistance for Bangladesh channeled through DFID, development priorities of the country and issues of bilateral, regional and international interests.
Lowcock's visit to Bangladesh is to know the development priorities of the new government through holding meetings with different ministries. He said DFID would finalize the assistance plan through consultation and coordination with the government.
Welcoming the delegation, Foreign Minister Dr Dipu Moni hoped that the assistance would help Bangladesh meet its development challenges in priority areas such as health, education, food, shelter, climate change adaptation, capacity building, improvement of governance, infrastructure, and trade and investment. She also called for favourable policies of the UK government in respect of large British-Bangladesh community in the UK.
The discussion between the Foreign Minister and the British High Commissioner covered issues like cooperation with the UK in counter-terrorism, regional cooperation within South Asia and SAARC contexts, and sending Bangladeshi peacekeepers to a UN Mission in response to a request from the British Prime Minister, said a Foreign Ministry release.
It added that the issue of ceasefire in Gaza and how to bring durable solution and peace for Palestine also came up for discussion.

Corruption of Tk 41 cr in BTCL

UNB, Dhaka

The Anti-Corruption Commission has uncovered more irregularities and corruption involving over Tk 41 crore in Bangladesh Telecommunications Company Limited

(BTCL), previously known as Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board (BTTB).
ACC director general (admin) Col Hanif Iqbal told its regular briefing on Thursday that a special team has found clear evidence of withdrawal of money beyond budgetary allocation and misappropriation during 2000-2001 fiscal and 2007-2008 fiscal.
The special ACC team, constituted to find out graft and irregularities in the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications, has discovered that in 19 offices of divisional engineers, officials and employees in connivance with each other have withdrawn Tk 23.81 crore beyond budgetary allocation thr-ough abuse of power and misappropriated Tk 17.57 crore through false documents.
There are 55 offices of the divisional engineers under six general managers' offices. The above-stated corruption took place in 19 more corruption-affected offices.

Political committee in 15 days to face affects of global recession

Foreign debt to shrink by 1-2 per cent of budget: Muhith

UNB, Dhaka

Finance Minister Abul Maal Abdul Muhith on Wednesday said the government will announce a high-powered political committee within next 15 days to face the possible affects of the global recession on the country's economy.
"I'll invite representation from the opposition even," he told newsmen after separate meetings with the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) and Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MCCI) at the Finance Ministry conference room.
FBCCI President Annisul Huq led the delegation from the apex trade body while MCCI President Hafiz Chowdhury led the MCCI delegation as the Minister began exchanging views with trade bodies from Wednesday.
The Minister said he would head the committee to be represented by the stakeholders of trade, industry, business and the economy to keep close watch on the affects of the financial crisis.
The task force of officials formed earlier in this regard would work side by side while the Bangladesh Better Business Forum (BBBF) would continue to function, he said, adding that it's unlikely to be possible to hold the BBBF meeting quarterly.
Muhith's announcement about the formation of the committee came as the two trade bodies raised concern over the impact of global financial crisis and put forward recommendations to face the possible setbacks.
The issues of concerns include reduction of lending rates at a tolerable level particularly for the export-oriented and manufacturing sectors, keeping exchange rate stable and competitive, giving priority to agriculture, industry and services sectors while considering bank loans instead of trade financing, restricting public borrowing from the banking system and bringing transparency in the capital market.

Govt warns against loan borrowers showing fake documents

Staff Correspondent

Government will take steps to prevent people taking bank loans in the name of setting up industry showing fake documents.
"We see a section of businessmen in the name of setting up industry, take loans from banks but after getting the money they spend it for other purposes. We will stop such trend. If anybody takes loans for setting up industry but practically he invest the money in other sector, he would be deemed as violator and stern action would be taken against him,", Industries Minister Dilip Barua said while talking to the leaders of International Business Forum of Bangladesh (IBFB) at his office in the city on Wednesday.
Dilip Barua said if industry does not grow up, no employment will be created in the country. "After discussion with different trade bodies, we will upgrade our existing industry policy to create an industry-friendly economic atmosphere. If an industry-friendly economic environment is ensured, entrepreneurs will be attracted to invest in the country," he said.
He said the government is now attaching importance on two sectors, agro-based industry and Information Technology (IT) sector. "In the real sense, if we want to expand the industry sector, firstly, there is no alternative to develop the banking sector. Side by side, importance will also have to be given our domestic products," the Industries Minister said.

ADB to help new govt overcome adverse effects of global recession

UNB, Dhaka

Visiting ADB (Asian Development Bank) Vice President Xiaoyu concluded his two-day visit to Bangladesh Wednesday, assuring the new government of their support to overcome any adverse effects of the global recession.
"ADB stands ready to support the government to overcome any adverse effects of the global financial crisis," he said in a statement on his visit. During the visit, the ADB VP met Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, other senior ministers and officials when he assured them of the bank support to achieve a more inclusive socioeconomic development by raising investment in sectors like health, education and agriculture.
"ADB will extend strong support and cooperation to help Bangladesh to sustain progress on the MDGs and become a middle-income country by 2021 as pledged by the new government, Zhao said.
He expressed the interest to work more closely with the new government to secure further development of the country and help realize its vision for development.
"We're also firmly committed to assisting the government in scaling up the pace of infrastructure development, increasing power production, promoting regional cooperation and continuing governance reforms," he said.

The ADB VP also noted the significant improvement in ADB's operational performance in recent years and stressed the need for further acceleration of project implementation.
Zhao, while meeting the Prime Minister, sought the government's support for ADB's efforts to expeditiously secure a General Capital Increase (GCI), which would allow ADB to scale up its future operations to ensure that public investment programs in support of inclusive and environmentally sustainable growth in the Asia Pacific region are not compromised.
A wide range of issues, including the proposed Padma Bridge, assistance in health, education and agriculture sectors, came up in the meetings with the Ministers for Finance, Communications, and LGRD and Cooperatives.

298 frozen bank accounts to be unlocked within a week: Muhith

Staff Correspondent

The government will unlock within one week 298 bank accounts of politicians, businessmen and government high officials frozen by the caretaker government in connection with their corruption and irregularities.
"The account-holders will be able to start drawing cheques and financial transactions through these accounts after a week the" after a meeting with visiting Asian Development Bank (ADB) Vice-President Xiaoyu Zhao , Finance Minister AMA Muhith told journalists.
Showing reasons for opening frozen accounts, he said that these accounts were frozen during state of emergency. "As state of emergency is not operative in the country right now, the frozen accounts will be unlocked" he added.
However, the finance minister ruled out possibility of returning confiscated money to their owners as those siphoned off money was recovered from abroad and already been deposited to public exchequer. He clarified "It is out of question to return the money as it has become government property now."
He gave an intimation that cases against owners of these accounts will be disposed of through legal procedure. "Legal procedure against them will continue as law should take its own course," he said.
Replying to a query as to how government will spend Tk 1200 crore retrieved money, he said this money becomes public property as it has been deposited to government account and the government will resort to legal battle if owners of this money go to court for getting back their siphoned of money.
The caretaker government led by Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed froze these bank accounts in its purge against corruption in high places and recovered Tk 1200 crore siphoned off money from abroad.

Country set for UZ poll tomorrow after 19 years
Electoral trail ends

Staff Correspondent

Candidates of Chairmen, Vice-Chairmen male and Vice-Chairmen (female reserved) of Upazila Councils on Tuesday spent the final hours canvassing frantically to woo voters before the deadline as the country is set to stage the much awaited upazila elections tomorrow, Thursday, January 22 under tight security measures, after nearly 19 years.

Workers, supporters and relatives of the candidates from all political parties and independents brought out procession at their respective upazilas. In the final campaign hours, the candidates were very busy in door-to-door campaigning and addressing rallies across the country. Many senior leaders from both ruling Awami League and opposition BNP toured their respective areas to drum up support for their candidates since electioneering began on January 1.

Meanwhile, talking to reporters Election Commissioner Brigadier General M Shakhawat Hossian on Tuesday said election code of conduct is being violated throughout the country due to influence and intervention by the political leaders from both Awami League and BNP.

"The Election Commission was determined to hold the upazila election keeping it out of any political influence but High Court's verdict encouraged political influence in the election. As a result, incidents of violation of election code of conduct and clashes are taking place as political leaders are influencing the electoral trail," Shakhawat Hossain said.

He said the Election Commission has already directed the law enforcing agencies to intensify patrolling during the poll to create congenial environment for the people in casting votes without fear and intimidation and all restrictions activated in the national poll would be followed in upazila poll. He also said law enforcers have been asked to suspend voting instantly at any polling center if any violent incident takes place there.

"None will be allowed to convene, hold or attend any public meeting, and no person will be allowed to organise or join any procession within the election area after midnight today (Tuesday)," talking to reporters Election Commissioner Brigadier General M Shakhawat Hossian said.

According to an Election Commission notification, contenders will have to wrap up their poll campaigns at midnight past Tuesday while the restrictions will continue till forty eight- hours after the completion of vote casting.

Meanwhile Army troops rolled out from different barracks yesterday and were deployed as "striking force" alongside regular police, paramilitary Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) and elite anti- crime Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and other law enforcement and security agencies as the government ordered a "maximum security alert" against possible law and order situation.

A total of 8,131 candidates including 3,316 Chairman, 2,879 Vice-Chairman and 1,936 Vice-Chairman (female reserved) were vying for 480 chairmen, Vice-Chairmen and Vice Chairman (female reserved). It is expected that some 7,35, 77, 286 voters will cast vote to elect their respective Upazila chairman and two Vice-Chairmen. People will cast their votes through a total of 32,381 polling centres. Predicting huge

turn out of voters, the Election Commission has established more 11,831 polling booths in order to smoothen vote casting.
The commission notification said a ban was imposed on movement of some types of vehicles in election areas, from midnight of January 20 till midnight of January 22 adding that the plying of motorcycles would be stopped from midnight of January 20 till midnight of January 24.

Govt to reform 'Income Tax Law' if necessary: NBR Chairman

Staff Correspondent

In order to expand business and create a friendly atmosphere in the country's business sector, if needed, the government will bring reform in the existing 'Income Tax Law-1922'.
"If necessary, for the expansion of trade and business and to bring the economy on the right track, the government will bring reform and change in the existing 'Income Tax Law 1922'. If the reform and change are brought in the existing law, the businessmen who face difficulties in paying taxes will be able to run their business smoothly. On the other hand, government will also be able to collect tax from the businessmen properly and smoothly. As a result, the tendency to dodge tax by the businessmen will be reduced drastically," NBR Chairman Abdul Mazid said at an exchange of view meeting with business leaders of the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI) in the city on Tuesday.
Mazid said that the NBR is ready to support the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) for the good of the economy. "This year's taxation in the budget will be to create employment in the country. We also want to create a business-friendly environment. But participation of the business people is also important," the NBR chairman said.
He said overcoming a serious economic recession, now Bangladesh stands at better position. "We want to march forward in full swing. We believe in the business friendly custom duty policy. But it is not possible for the government alone if the businessmen and traders don't cooperate with the government," he said.

AL facing rival contestants in 116 upazilas

65 teams on field to settle intra-party feuds

Sahidul Islam Rana

With only two days left of the forthcoming Upazila Parishad election race, the Awami League failed to settle the factional rivalry inside the party.
Apprehending a debacle in the polls slated for January 22, the top brass of the party are anxious about the rebellious contestants - who are still in the polls race in at least 116 upazilas out of some 481 - defying party commands, said party insiders.
Directives of the Prime Minister and AL President Sheikh Hasina to grassroots leaders of the party to choose a single candidate for the post of chairman in the Upazila

Parishad poll are not being properly carried out till date, according to reports reaching here from different corners through out the country.
Besides, despite efforts by senior field level leaders to resolve intra-party feuds centering nomination, sporadic clashes were reported in many areas between the supporters of rival contestants and those of the AL-backed candidates.
Talking to The Bangladesh Today, a member of the AL Election Conducting Committee Mrinal Datya said, "There is no direct party ticket system in this poll as per electroral rules. Indirectly in some 265 upazilas, there are AL's single candidate. A total of 65 teams - comprising of Central Assistant-Secretaries and, President and Secretaries of respective district committees are in the field across the country to gear up the election campaign."
"The Central Committee formed teams recently to resolve the problems among the candidates and asked to finalise the party nominations by January 17. We are yet to finalise the names by today," he hoped.
Sources said, in many upazilas where rival contenders from the AL stepped out of the polls race following intervention from party high-ups, are not working for party candidates.
Asked about the issue AL Office Secretary Abdul Mannan Khan MP said, "The AL is a big party. These might be intra-party feuds but it would not badly affect AL. Many of the rival candidates did not agree to relinquish the ongoing electoral race hoping to get favour as the AL is in power."

BNP express concern about upazila polls

Staff Correspondent

The leaders and workers of BNP and its associate organizations on Monday observed 73rd birth anniversary of late President Ziaur Rahman, founder of the party, in a befitting manner throughout the country.
After placing floral wreath and offering prayer at Zia's grave, Khandaker Delwar Hossain and Jamiruddin Sircar told journalists separately that BNP would go to parliament for playing its constructive role to make the parliament functional.
Khandaker Delwar warned the AL-led alliance to refrain from doing any anti-people activities. "Bagging majority seats of the parliament, if the government does anything which goes against the interest of the people, BNP leaders and activists along with commoners will strongly protest it," he added.
Jamiruddin Sircar said the newly elected government should not undermine and ignore the opposition on the basis of its parliament seats. "The opposition political party does not mean opposition in the parliament. Opposition is a part and parcel of the parliament. So opposition should not be measured according to poll results. The opposition has the opportunity to discuss and point out the ruling party's activities and taking part in policy decision. In this regard, opposition can play a pivotal role in the parliament," said the outgoing Speaker.
He said opposition MPs will have to continue placing their views during the sessions whether their opinions or suggestions are accepted or not and at the same time the

ruling party will have to give a patient hearing to the opposition.
"We had a great expectation in December 29 general election of bagging many seats but the result was otherwise. But it doesn't mean that BNP is finished. BNP workers are still at every house throughout the country as the party always thinks for the welfare of the people. During BNP- Jammat regime I had allocated 60 per cent time for the opposition. So, if the ruling party wants to make the parliament effective, it will have to sanction sufficient time for the opposition,' Jamiruddin said.

Modern industrial policy soon, says Dilip Barua

BSS, Dhaka

Industries Minister Dilip Barua on Monday Said, a modern industrial policy would be framed soon to implement 'Vision 2021' and achieve 'Digital Bangladesh' that are commitments of the present government.
"In the new policy due emphasis will be given to protect the rights of the owners and the industrial workers equally," he said in an exclusive interview with BSS.
Dilip Barua said that before going to enunciate the new industrial police suggestions and opinion would be taken formally from various chambers and business houses, think tanks, trade union bodies. "We will also evaluate properly and obtain ingredients from the industrial policies framed by different governments in the past, " he added.
"Without industrialisation no national progress and prosperity could be attained ", he said adding that all sorts of incentives would be made available for attracting national and international investors as well as initiatives from overseas Bangladeshis for quick industrialisation of the country.
While elaborating on the proposed policy, the minister said, equal emphasis would be given for immediate, short term and long term industrialisation. But most emphasis would be laid down on labour-intensive industries so that huge employment opportunities could be generated in the country.
Referring to the acute unemployment problems in the country, Dilip Barua said, the government of Sheikh Hasina would do everything possible to make huge human resources into trained manpower and employ them in suitable jobs at home and abroad.

Govt to adopt edn policy of Shamsul Haque Commission

UNB, Dhaka

Education Minister Nurul Islam Nahid on Monday said the government would adopt the education policy formulated by the then Shamsul Haque Commission.
"We would like to implement the education policy of the previous Awami League government with some updates," he said while talking to a delegation of National Teachers-Employees Front at his office.
Nahid said the government's main concern is to remove illiteracy and improve the

standard of higher education.
The Education Minister said a qualitative change would be brought in education through increasing facilities for education centers and financial support to teachers.
Asked about the recent violence in different universities, he said any irregularities, malpractice and terrorism would not be tolerated on the campus. The delegation urged the Education Minister to form 10 taskforces to remove corruption from the education sector.

Contempt rule issued upon woman journalist for denying disclosing source of news

UNB, Dhaka

The High Court on Monday issued rule upon a woman journalist of a weekly newspaper to explain why punitive action should not be taken against her for denying disclosing the source of news as asked in a contempt of court case.
Issuing the rule, a division bench comprising Justice ABM Khairul Haque and Justice M Abdul Hye set January 27 for hearing on the matter.
Reporter Nasreen Akhter of the weekly 'Sheersha Kagoj' appearing at the court submitted affidavit-in-opposition through her lawyer denying disclosing the source of news.
In her affidavit, she said disclosure of the source of news is contrary to the ethics of journalism. Once the source of news is disclosed, all sources of information will stop and as a result, people will be deprived of their rights to get information. Conveying due respect to the court and the judges, Nasreen expressed her inability to divulge the source of news despite facing possible punishment.
On January 7 last year, vernacular weekly 'Sheersha Kagoj' published a special report headlined, 'kalo takao sada korlen ak bicharpati' (a judge too whitens black money), pointing finger at Justice Shah Abu Nayeem Mominur Rahman of the High Court.

Public universities in turmoil

Staff Correspondent

Academic activities of different higher educational institutions including Dhaka, Chittagong, Jahangirnagar and Jagannath universities are going through serious crisis due to internal clashes between affiliated student bodies of major political parties centering control and supremacy over campuses.
Besides, leaders and workers of Chattra League were also involved in clashes with Jatiyatabadi Chattra Dal and Chattra Shibir, the student wings of BNP and Jamaat respectively, soon after forming the new government by Awami League-led grand alliance. As a result education environment in different public universities have been tremendously hampered by the political activity of several politically backed student

organisations specially Chattra League.
A tense situation has been prevailing in the educational institutions of the country since the holding of the election on Dec 29. Three higher institutions- Khulna Medical College (KMC), Khulna Government BL College and Sir Salimullah Medical College were forced to shut down for an indefinite period in last ten days.
In last few days, BCL activists occupied the Dhaka University dormitories, vandalized several rooms, locked in intra-party clashes and attacked activists of rival organizations on the campus for several periods.
Political analyst Prof Imtiaz Ahmed, a teacher of DU International Relations, observed this as an ominous sign for the future of politics in the country.
"We heard that Sheikh Hasina ordered BCL leaders to refrain from doing such wrong thing. If that order is not executed, it proves the BCL activists are out of control," he said.

Cost of workers going abroad likely to increase

Staff Correspondent

Expatriates' Welfare & Overseas Employment Minister Engineer Moshar-raf Hossain on Sunday gave intimation that the government fixed rate for sending workers abroad through recruiting agencies may be increased.
After holding a meeting with leaders of Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA) at his ministry, he said "BAIRA leaders said current rate was fixed three years ago and it has to be raised in a situation where cost of everything is high."
He said the government has taken steps in forming Bangladeshi workers' welfare association in every country to deal with the suffering of the workers on emergency basis and seek help from BD diplomats and labour attaché therein.
"The government decided to form BD workers' welfare association in every country to handle any untoward situation and suffering of workers. Besides association leaders will be able to seek help from our diplomats and labour attaché in the respective country. The process for forming such association has already started," he said.
He added that the government will also take step for establishing 'expatriate welfare bank' as suggested by BAIRA leaders to provide BD outgoing workers with loans and transact remittances.
"At present many expatriates are sending money illegally. This bank will be established exclusively for expatriates; they and the state both will be benefited. When expatriates will know that their parents and other family members will get several thousands taka interest sending remittance through this bank, they will not send money otherwise," he said.
About realising extra money by recruiting agencies, he said "People suffer for their own mistake because they never admit realisation of extra-money from them unless they fall in trouble abroad. So, we suggest aspirant overseas workers to abstain from contacting middle man except recognised recruiting agencies."

He also said that the government is sending message to overseas BD workers through its diplomatic envoys not to leave the host country for their temporary inconvenience of work opportunity caused by global economic recession because such inconvenience will not continue.

PM seeks UK's assistance to combat terrorism

She goes over 'Anti-Terrorism Task Force' in South Asia

Staff Correspondent

The Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, has sought cooperation of the British Government and the international community to combat terrorism in Bangladesh.
The Awami Leauge President further reiterated her intention for the formation of an 'Anti-Terrorism Task Fore in South Asia' and said, "Terrorism has no boundary. We need cooperation from Britain in fighting against terrorism."
Quoting Sheikh Hasina, her Press Secretary Abul Kalam Azad said this after about one hour meeting of British High Commissioner in Dhaka Stephen Evans with Hasina at her Dhanmondi Sudha Sadan residence on Saturday morning.
The Press Secretary said the UK envoy conveyed British Prime Minister Gordon Brown's felicitation to Sheikh Hasina for assuming office of the Prime Minister.
During discussion, the Prime Minster urged the British Government to extend greater cooperation for different bilateral issues, poverty alleviation, overseas investment in different sectors like Solar Energy and supports to train up young members of parliament (MPs).

Countrywide committees to be revamped after UZ polls: Delwar

Staff Correspondent

BNP, the main opposition political party in the parliament, will revamp its all committees and associate bodies after January 22 upazila election in order to strengthen the party's organizational activities
BNP Secretary General Khandaker Delwar Hossain and Vice-Chairman MK Anwar separately on Saturday said after upazila election, a major change will be brought in BNP's committees at all levels and to its associate organisations.
"BNP's senior leaders will sit for taking decision to revamp the party's committees and its associate bodies after upazila poll. The committees from grassroots level including village, union, upazila and district unit to top level will be reorganised through holding council. On the basis of honesty, popularity and sincerity, the change in leadership at all levels will be brought," Khandaker Delwar Hossain said while taking to reporters in front of the NAM flat in the capital yesterday.
He said there are no committees of BNP and its associate bodies in different areas

since long. "At first we will convene council meeting for forming the new committee of those areas where there is no committee since long. Later other committees will be formed in phases. We are aiming for a major reshuffle in BNP politics. The incumbent senior leaders, who are now holding vital posts, will also be reshuffled. To reshuffle the committee and bring changes in the party, we have already started collecting information and opinion of all kinds of leaders throughout the country," Delwar Hossain said.
Replying to a query, he said after forming grassroots level committees and collecting necessary information relating to performance of BNP leaders, the national council of BNP would be convened soon. "It is a matter of time to convene the national council for a big political party like BNP. So we will try our best to convene the national council as early as possible with a view to gear up our political activities," he said.

Fertiliser sale at higher price after January 14 prohibited

Govt warns stern action against selling fertiliser at higher rate

Staff Correspondent

The government will not tolerate sale and distribution of fertiliser at higher rate and if any businessman or government official is involved in any irregularities, he/she will be punished.
"The government has reduced prices of non-urea fertilisers by 50 percent. It has taken all necessary steps to ensure sale and distribution of fertilisers at reduced rate. If any businessman or government official is engaged in the above corruption, he/she will be punished heavily," Agriculture Secretary Sheikh Enayet Ullah warned at a press briefing at the ministry's conference room yesterday.
He said an inter-ministerial committee comprising representatives of Agriculture and Industries ministries remaining dysfunctional for long will be revived shortly to monitor and ensure proper distribution of fertilisers at cheaper rate.
"Now the government is reshuffling fertilizer distribution management. Earlier, an inter-ministerial committee which remained dysfunctional for long will be revived within few days," he added.
About total volume of subsidy to be given for fertiliser, he said "The government will have to subsidize Tk 2,756 crore for selling non-urea fertilizers at the reduced prices. Mode of subsidy is that Tk 1,520 crore will be paid to BADC and BCIC while Tk 1,236 crore to private importers."
He assured said that adequate fertilisers will be supplied to the market because of having adequate quantity of various kinds of fertilisers in government storage.
"Demand for all kinds of fertilizers during the Boro season (January-March) is comparatively higher, but stock of TSP is 3.19 lakh tons as against demand of 1.34 lakh tons, MOP 2.19 lakh tons as against 1.08 lakh tons and Di Ammonium Phosphate (DAP) 48,400 tons as against 60,000 tons. The less stock of DAP will not create any problem because its use in Boro season is not important," he said.

NBR bids to raise revenue from internal sources

UNB, Chittagong

Chairman of National Board of Revenue on Saturday said they would try to raise revenue income from internal sources to make up the shortfall caused from the impact of decline in commodity prices in the world market.
"Our revenue growth has been based on collection of import duty and VAT that failed to reach the target. We are not unhappy at that. We are trying to change the trend and raise revenue income from internal sources," Chairman Abdul Mazid told reporters here in the afternoon.
Revenue collection during the first five months (July-November) of current fiscal year stood at Tk 18,614 crore as against the strategic target set at Tk 22,708 crore for the period. But it is higher than that of the corresponding period of last year of Tk 16,140 crore.
Earlier in the morning Mazid saw operation of container scanner and automation of the customs house in Chittagong port. He noted with satisfaction that the scanner and automation would help plug the loopholes false declaration of cargoes, check evasion of duty and ensure transparency and accountability.
"With the setting up of scanner and automation of the customs house we are entering into digital Bangladesh," he added.
The NBR chief had a closed door meeting with officials of container scanner and customs automation. He exhorted the officials to ensure security of the port.
Later Mazid met with the business community at the Chamber House.

Rival groups of devotees fight inside Baitul Mukarram Mosque

Common people demand punishment of offenders

Staff Correspondent

Amid clashes, chase and counter, shoe throwing on each other between the followers of former and incumbent Khatib of Baitul Mukarram national mosque, common people from different places of the city on Friday offered Jumma prayers.
According to witness when newly appointed Khatib Mawlana Mohammad Salahuddin reached Baitul Mukrram mosque for leading the Jumma prayers, a group of devotes loyal to former Khatib started chanting slogan against the newly appointed Khatib and threw shoes targeting him. Another group of devotees loyal to the new Khatib, protested and at one stage they also chased the rival group. The two factions later were locked in serious clash and started assaulting each other. Within a moment the whole area from Paltan crossing to Dainik Bangla Crossing turned into a battle field amid heavy deployment of police in the area to avert untoward incident.
Sensing trouble, the common people also started running here and there for shelter and many of them left the mosque without saying Jumma prayers. On receipt of the

information, additional police rushed to the spot and brought the situation under control.
Later common people and the followers of new Khatib Salahuddin, offered Jumma prayers inside the Baitul Mukarram mosque. On the other hand, the rebel faction of devotees boycotting Jumma under the leadership of new Khatib, came out on the street and offered Jumma prayers in front of the north gate of Baitul Mukarram mosque under the leadership of Hafez Mawlana Mufti Abdullah.

Japanese PM Taro Aso phones Hasina, offers $ 400 million credit for power sector

UNB, Dhaka

Japanese Prime Minister Taro Aso made a telephone call on Friday afternoon to Sheikh Hasina and congratulated her on the assumption of Prime Minister's office. The Japanese Prime Minister desc-ribed the election victory of Awami League under her leadership as a significant event. Taro Aso offered a package credit of US$ 400 million for the development of Bangladesh's power sector. Welcoming the offer, Hasina sought more cooperation from Tokyo in power, agriculture and communications sectors.
Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said the tourism sector in Bangladesh will be further developed and requested the Japanese premier to encourage Japanese tourists to travel in greater numbers to Bangladesh. She thanked Taro Aso for the phone call and also for sending election observers by the Japan-Bangladesh Friendship League. Hasina also thanked Japan's role during the Bangladesh's Liberation War in 1971 and its contributions to the post-war reconstruction of the country.
Japanese Ambassador Masayuki Inoue was present during the telephone conversation.

BNP leaders allege vote rigging in 9th parliamentary poll, term 105% vote casting unacceptable

Staff Correspondent

BNP Standing Committee Members Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain and Moudud Ahmed and Joint Secretary General Nazrul Islam Khan categorically on Friday reiterated allegation that Awami League led grand alliance has come to power through massive vote rigging and election engineering.
"The election commission officials conspired in favour of Awami League-led grand alliance during 9th parliament election. As part of this plot, their claim of 87 percent votes casting at every poll centres is unbelievable and unfair," he alleged projecting some documents while BNP Standing Committee Members Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain and Moudud Ahmed were present.

Nazrul Islam Khan showed some documents about vote rigging at Gohelapur High School poll centre in Naogaonj-6 constituency where a total of 3845 votes were cast out of 3768 votes of the centre. After holding election, many ballot papers, ballot boxes and seals were seen at different places including streets, paddy fields but the EC remained silent. Considering these, the national parliament election was not impartial, credible and neutral and people's opinion was not reflected in this poll.
"Instead of taking initiatives against these irregularities, the EC remained silent. Besides, it threatened to file case against those who are making complaints. On the basis of these irregularities and mismanagements we can be sure that Awami League has come to power through massive election engineering," he alleged.
He urged the government to play a neutral rule, meet the demand of the countrymen and ensure an atmosphere inside the parliament so that BNP lawmakers can stay there. "We want to join the parliament and cooperate with the government as people gave us votes to raise voice to protect their interest," he added.

PM orders immediate steps to increase power, gas production

A cell formed, tax on solar energy exempted

Staff Correspondent

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Wednesday asked concerned officials to take immediate steps for increasing power and gas production as needed for agricultural and industrial purposes, simultaneously she underlined need for a new energy policy.
Sheikh Hasina, also in charge of power, energy and mineral resources, held the first meeting with different high-ups of energy sector asking them to take all necessary steps for increase of electricity and gas production and implement those honestly without any hesitation.
"Electricity crisis has become an acute problem for the country and people specially farmers and industrial manufacturers are being affected badly due to shortage of electricity. For want of electricity many industries have winded up. As the coming season of agricultural cultivation will require huge power, you (officials) will have take immediate steps for enhancing power production," she said.
Blaming deterioration of energy sector in last seven years, she said her government during 1996-2001 went a long way in promoting energy but after that no substantial progress occurred. She said "I have to know as to what happened during last seven years in energy sector and as to why this sector is facing such acute crisis."
Asking the officials not to suffer from indecision and panic, she said "38 years have elapsed after independence but no material change took place. We want to stand holding our head high in the international community. I want quick decision and quick implementation. Already ten days have elapsed since we formed government. I want to see what have been done in these days. There is no time to be wasted. If development activities are not started from the outset, it will be foiled midway."

BERC accepts proposals on power tariff hike

The watchdog holds public hearing in Feb, announces decision in May

UNB, Dhaka

Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) has accepted in principle electricity-price readjustment at retail level but will announce its decision within May as to whether or not to allow the power-distribution companies to raise the tariffs.
Before the announcement, the watchdog body will hold public hearing on the issue in February to elicit opinion from the retail customers and other stake-holders.
"We've accepted proposals from different power-distribution companies to raise power tariffs. Now, our plan is to hold public hearing on the issue and then announce our judgment within 90 working days from acceptance of the offers," BERC Chairman Ghulam Rahman told UNB.
From early this month, so far four power-distribution com-panies-DPDC, DESCO, West-zone and REB-have appealed to the BERC to raise their tariff rates by 11-15 per cent for retail customers.
Earlier on September 29, the BERC allowed the mother company in power sector-Power Development Board (PDB) which is responsible for power generation-to raise power price at bulk-customer level by 16 per cent. But it had no impact on the retail level as it was only applicable for the distribution companies who are PDB's bulk customers.
But, following the 16 per cent enhancement, the distribution companies consequently moved to raise their tariffs at retail level to cover the 16 per cent rise at bulk level.

DU teachers, students burn effigy of Israeli PM

DU Correspondent

The teachers and students of Dhaka University on Thursday burnt effigy of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert on the campus in protest against Israeli massacres in Gaza.
The demonstrators under the banner 'Teacher-Student Resis-tance Against Israeli Agression in Palestine' brought out a protest procession on the campus and arranged an anti-war cultural function at the premises of Aparajeyo Bangla. Prof Emeritus Dr Serajul Islam Chowdhury inaugurated the programmes in the morning.
DU teachers Md Akhtaruzzaman, MM Akash, Anwar Hossein, Harun-or-Rashid, Nimchandra Bhoumick and Robayet Ferdous, among others, participated. A good number of DU students, Palestinian students studying in Dhaka and a counsel of the Embassy of Palestine also took part at the programmes.
Prof Serajaul Islam, in his speech, blamed US and other imperialist western countries for the ongoing barbarism in Gaza.
"Those countries are backing Israel providing weapons and money to gain narrow political and economic interest in the Middle East. The target of Israel is to eliminate

the Palestinian resistance so that they can not further raise their voice for freedom," he said.
"The Israelis are committing war crimes by killing children and women using controversial white phosphorus but the whole world is silent," said Palestinian student Selim, a 2nd year student of DU International Relations, who lost his two brothers in the ongoing Israeli aggression. He also demanded an independent and international investigation into the massacre and war crimes in Gaza.

ACC detects misuse of Tk 82 cr of Expatriates Welfare Fund

UNB, Dhaka

The Anti Corruption Commission (ACC) has unraveled that over Tk 82 crore has been misused from the Expatriates Welfare Fund in the name of two projects.
The misuse of project funds was uncovered by a special ACC team assigned to look into corruption and irregularities in the fund set up for welfare of the expatriates.
The Expatriates Welfare Fund was set up at the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) under the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment.
Revealing the information, ACC Director General (Admin) Col Hanif Iqbal told the regular briefing Thursday afternoon that though the fund was set up with the money realized as service charge from the expatriates, money from the fund had been misused/misappropriated at different times in various ways.
Giving details of Tk 82 crore misused from the fund, he said a project was undertaken in 2004 to construct a housing complex in Bhatara, Gulshan. The complex was supposed to be completed within May, 2007. But, only a nominal portion has been constructed.
Though construction work worth only Tk 5 crore has been completed, the developer was paid Tk 35 crore from the welfare fund. It appears that Tk 30 crore has been misused.

New secys at power, water resources, industries

bdnews24.com, Dhaka

Four additional secretaries were virtually promoted to the post of secretary on Thursday in a major reshuffle of civil servants that also saw changes in top position of several ministries.
Three others, already secretaries, will move their desks, according to an official announcement on Thursday.
Nasiruddin Ahmed, liberation war affairs secretary under order of posting as ambassador to Qatar, will be the new power secretary to succeed Fouzul Kabir Khan, who had left the government job last week to take up teaching.
Sheikh Md Wahiduzzaman, now at science and ICT, will become the new water resources secretary.

Dewan Zakir Hossain will leave social welfare for industries.
Nazmul Huda Khan, chairman of SPARSO, will move up to become the new science and ICT secretary to work with Yafes Osman, the state minister in charge at the ministry.
Md Feroz Kibria, an additional secretary languishing at establishment as an OSD, will be acting secretary at the liberation war affairs ministry.
AKM Azizul Huq, director general at Government Employees' Welfare Board, has been made acting chairman of Bangladesh Tariff Commission.
Sunil Kanti Ghosh, the BRTA chairman and an additional secretary, will take over as acting secretary at social welfare ministry.

Govt takes landmark decision to boost agriculture

Staff Correspondent

In a landmark step to assist farmers to boost agricultural production, the government has raised subsidy on fertilizers from 15 per cent to 55 per cent and reduced the prices of three verities of fertilizers substantially.
According to the decision effective from midnight on Wednesday the prices of TSP (Triple Super Phosphate) was slashed from Tk 70 per kg to Tk 35 per kg, that of MoP (Murate of Potash) from Tk 70 to 35 per kg and DAP (Di-ammonium Phosphate) from Tk 90 to 45 per kg.
In the morning on Wednesday, Agriculture Minister Matia Chowdhury and Industry Minister Dilip Barua held a meeting to reduce fertilizer prices. Concerned high officials of the two ministries were also present in the meeting. Earlier a meeting of the new cabinet headed by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Monday decided to cut down the prices of fuel and fertilizer within a day or two as the principal farming season of irrigated paddy cultivation is now round the corner.
Emerging from the meeting Matia Chowdhury and Dilip Barua at a joint press conference held at Agriculture Ministry at Secretariat announced the government decision.
Matia Chowdhury said as per commitment, the government has reduced the price of fertilizer. "In order to free the farmers from difficulties and sufferings in getting fertilizer and to encourage cultivation in the peak season especially boro, the government has reduced the price of fertilizers. The reduction of fertilizer price will involve some 15 hundred 20 crore and 96 lakh taka to be provided as subsidy to state-run Bangladesh Chemical Industry Corporation and Bangladesh Agriculture Development Corporation while taka 12 hundred 36 crore to non-government sector. The subsidy has been increased to 55 per cent from the previous 15 per cent," Matia told journalists.
The Agriculture Minister said the government has also taken various initiatives to reach fertilizers to the door steps of the farmers. "Various measures have been taken to ensure smooth supply of fertilizer so that our farmers will be able to get this most essential input without any harassment and sufferings," she added.
About urea fertilizer, Matia Chowdhury said the government has already provided subsidy worth taka 4 thousands and 200 crore taka on urea fertilizer. "Per kilogram urea will be sold at taka 12 from right now. Earlier, per kilogram urea was sold at taka 30-35," she said.

Talking to newsmen BCIC Chairman Mukhlesur Rahman said it needed taka 5000 crore and taka 6000 crore for setting up two new fertilizer factories. Apart from this, government will have to spend taka 2800 crore for modernizing country's existing six fertilizer factories.

It may be pointed out that the farmers of the country face acute fertilizer crisis during the peak cultivation season each year due to inadequate fertilizer supply, mismanagement and shortfall in production, according to a source. But following the latest move by the Awami League-led grand alliance government, serious fertilizer crisis prevailing in the country may disappear during the upcoming irri-boro season and the situation is likely to improve in the near future.

The country's seven fertilizer factories have a production capacity of 22 lakh metric tons (mts) against the demand for 36.40 lakh tons of fertilizer per year. The rest 14 lakh mts of fertilizer is imported and also procured from the country's export-oriented Karnafuli Fertilizer Factory in Chittagong.

The present demand for Urea is 24.60 lakh mts, TSP-4.5 lakh mts, SSP-20 thousand mts, DAP-2 lakh mts, MOP 3.25 lakh mts, NPKS-50 thousand mts, Zipsum-1.20 lakh mts and Zink-15 thousand mts annually.

The BCIC has been given the responsibility to meet the demand for fertiliser through production in seven factories and import from foreign countries. But every year the farmers face acute crisis of fertiliser and at the same time they are to buy fertilizer at high cost due to artificial crisis created by a section of corrupt officials and dishonest dealers.

BB to follow accommodative monetary policy: Governor

BSS, Dhaka

The governor of Bangladesh Bank Dr Salehuddin Ahmed on Wednesday said, the central bank will follow an 'accommodative' monetary policy for the next six months to help stimulate efforts towards attaining growth targets.

Announcing the central bank's bi-annual monetary policy statement for January-June period 2009 at a press beefing in the conference room of the central bank, Dr Salehuddin Ahmed said, it mainly reflects continuity without major change from earlier policy stance announced in July last year.

All deputy governors and other senior central bank officials were present.

Justifying the new accommodative policy approach, the governor said, investment climate and investors confidence in the country has significantly strengthened recently with the end of political uncertainty and installation of an elected government to power.

He said, although there is no direct linkage between the central bank's policy stance with that of the development agenda of the political government, the central bank policy seeks to lend support to growth efforts adjusting policy actions such as by bringing down inflation, cutting back interest rates on lending and ensuring stability to other macroeconomic fundamentals. Presenting a brief growth outlook in the backdrop of the global and domestic economic situation, the governor said, Bangladesh remained largely unimpaired by global economic meltdown and has rather benefited from a sharp fall in prices in the global commodity market.

Opportunity for skilled BD workers in UK

Staff Correspondent

Bangladeshi origin British businessmen on Wednesday sought cooperation from government to set up a curry school in Dhaka to produce skilled manpower for curry industry to fulfill the growing demand of BD workers in Britain.

"In Britain, there are 12 thousands restaurants which are mainly operated by the Bangla-deshi migrants. As many as 1 lakh Bangladeshi are working in those restaurants. At present, there is demand of thirty thousand skilled manpower in Britain," said Bajloor Rashid, president of Bangladesh Caterers' Association (BCA), at a press conference in the city yesterday morning.

"We want to set up a Curry school in London and a branch of this school will be set up in Dhaka. Successful candidates from Bangladesh campus will be allowed admission in London campus. After successful completion of the course, they will get the opportunity to work in these restaurants," Bajloor Rashid said.

He said the curry industry has been facing difficulties due to shortage of skilled manpower. "Right now, there is a shortage of 30 thousands of manpower in these curry industry."

He also underscored the need for infrastructural development in Bangladesh saying, "IF Bangladesh government assists us, we will set up a curry school in Dhaka to produce skilled manpower. Bangladesh can earn a huge amount of foreign exchange every year if it can send skilled manpower to Britain."

"A cross section of businessmen and members of the newly elected government has already assured us of providing all sorts of assistance to train-up the skilled manpower," he said.

New govt wants maximum implementation of ADP: PM

Three projects worth Tk 847cr approved in maiden ECNEC meet

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said her new government wants maximum implementation of the annual development programme (ADP), maintaining standard quality, for development of socioeconomic condition and physical infrastructure.

She made the remarks at the maiden meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (ECNEC) Tuesday after her assumption of office as the head of government.

Held at the National Economic Council (NEC) Bhaban at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar at 3pm, the meeting approved three projects involving a total outlay of Tk 847 crore, including one revised project on physical infrastructure and socioeconomic sectors.

The three approved projects are - buying a dredger at a cost of Tk 170 crore for development of river routes, Public University Development Project (Tk 444 crore)

and the 1st phase of Infrastructural and Qualitative Development of University Education with involvement of Tk 233 crore (revised). Planning Minister AK Khandaker apprised reporters of the outcome of the ECNEC meeting at a post-meeting briefing.

"The Prime Minister said maximum projects of the ADP will have to be implemented as well as the standard quality of works has to be maintained," the Planning Minister told the briefing session. He said despite slow pace in implementing the current ADP, adopted by the just-past caretaker government, the present government is hopeful about implementation of 85-95 per cent of the total development budget by April-May. Asked whether the government has any plan to revise the ADP as a new government has taken charge, Khandaker said most of the projects would continue as it is, but, if necessary, minor changes may come in implementation for ensuring good quality.

"But there is no chance of stopping or bringing change in those projects which have been implemented 90 per cent so far," he said. Khandaker said the current ADP includes 904 projects. Of these projects, 857 are approved and 35 of these have been approved by the ECNEC during the July-December period with involvement of Tk 14,452 crore.

Asked about government's priority sector for development, Khandaker said as described in the ADP, the agriculture sector would get the top-most priority.

Ministers, MPs have to submit wealth statement in Feb

Padma Bridge construction starts in 2011, consultant appointment this month

Staff Correspondent

Ministers and parliament members (MPs) will have to submit their wealth statements from the next month (February) and action will be taken in case of tax evasion.

During meeting with revenue officials at NBR premises, Finance Minister Abul Maal Muhit said "Members of the cabinet and the parliament will have to submit their wealth statements from the next month. In case of tax evasion, action will be taken against anybody irrespective of his/her political identity."

He said not only the ministers and MPs will have to submit their wealth statements but also they will have to be update on payment of taxes. He said although it was committed in the past poll manifestos to introduce a system of extracting wealth account from ministers and MPs and disseminate those among the people but it was not implemented. "As the matter constituted a part of Awami League's poll manifesto, I shall have to do it in February. Everybody within the government will have to submit statement which will be a public domain," he said.

"Income tax evasion is an infringement of law. The matter needs to be dealt with an iron hand, the drive will continue. We have seen how unbelievable rich monsters had emerged in the country. If you investigate, you will know what tax they are giving. They need to be punished," he said.

Suggesting new revenue challenge ahead, he said as the government is set to

implement huge development and construction programmes, there will be a huge pressure of collecting revenue in the days to come to meet up those expenditure.
"Revenue needs to be raised but there may be a sliding trend of revenue due to global economic recession. Now it is necessary to multiply internal sources of revenue to face the above challenge," he added.
Meanwhile, Communications Minister Syed Abul Hossain said that the government has decided to commence the construction of proposed country's longest Padma Bridge from 2011.
Holding a meeting with bridge construction authority, he said "Construction of the bridge will commence in 2011 and we expect it will be finished within three years during this party's tenure in government."
He said design, supervision and management consultants will be appointed within this month as instructed by the Prime Minister. "We will complete appointment of consultant by this month, then design will be finalised and then tender will be floated," he added.

Trade policies to be streamlined: Faruq

BSS, Dhaka

Commerce Minister Lt Col (Retd) Faruq Khan on Tuesday said that if required the existing trade policies would be streamlined for bringing a revolutionary change in the country's trade and commerce.
"We want to make the trade policies time-befitting and I called upon the businessmen to let the government know about the policies those are hindering the economic activities," he said while inaugurating a four-day international fair dubbed "Garmentech" at Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Centre (BCFCC) here.
Zak Trade and Exhibitions Private Limited and Zakaria Trade and Fair International, Dhaka jointly organised the fair.
A total of 250 participants from 25 countries are displaying their products including RMG accessories, Netware and heavy laundry machineries in the show.
Faruq Khan described the new government as business-friendly and said it wants to help each and every businessmen of the country by providing them with policy support.
Identifying the power outages as one of the many problems in the business sector, the minister said the problem would be solved within one and a half years. "The people of the country have installed the government with overwhelming support and thus we want to work for the people of all spheres of life," said the minister. He noted with appreciation that the businessmen are honest and efficient people and said "If the businessmen work in a coordinated effort with the government, we would be able to implement our vision of 'Digital Bangladesh' by 2021".
Annisul Huq pointed out that the businessmen have suffered in the last 20 years due to the country's chaotic political situation and international economic disasters. He said Bangladesh's economy might be a victim of the global recession and suggested the government for undertaking urgent steps to face the challenges of the slowdown.

Khaleda vows to launch street agitation if govt does not stop oppression

Staff Correspondent

BNP chairperson and opposition leader in the parliament Begum Khaleda Zia on Saturday warned that if the government does not stop oppression, persecution and killing, the opposition will launch democratic movement in and out side the parliament.

"The government should not do anything which compels the opposition to go to streets from the parliament. We do not believe in the politics of vengeance. We will launch democratic movement to ease the sufferings of the common people," Khaleda said while addressing wayside rallies at Kodda crossing and Hatikumrul in Sirajganj on her way to Bogra yesterday.

She claimed, "People had voted massively for BNP in December 29 national elections. But the Caretaker Government and the Election Commission had defeated BNP in a planned way in a bid to get legitimacy of its two years illegal rule."

"After taking power, this government has broken its promises with the people and also with us." She said that the ruling party had promised before election to provide rice at Tk 10 per kg, supply free fertilizer to farmers and provide employment to one member of each family. "But they don't do what they say, what they do they don't say," She said.

She alleged that the government had also deviated from its commitment to offer the post of Deputy Speaker to the opposition. On the other hand sitting arrangement for opposition members in the parliament was yet to be revised as per BNP's objections and demand.

Referring to the new government's reported deal with India, Khaleda Zia said that the present government should not sign any deal with the neighboring country India that poses threat to independence. "We must remain united to protect our security, independence, sovereignty and interests," she told the people.

Parliamentary committee for discarding anti-constitution matters

UNB, Dhaka

The special parliamentary committee assigned to do the vetting of the 122 ordinances of the caretaker government's times strongly suggests discarding matters that contravenes the Constitution in enacting those into laws.

As the panel Saturday started careful scrutiny of the ordinances, promulgated during the tenure of the military-backed immediate-past interim regime, its members also underscored the need for ensuring reflection of the public opinion through enactment

of the ordinances by adopting "utmost carefulness".
In this regard, the special committee of lawmakers in its meeting at the parliament building felt the need for taking opinions of legal experts.
The committee started discussion and examination of the 122 Ordinances before placing those in the parliament as Bills.
"The meting decided to proceed with this matter through threadbare analysis of the Ordinances by upholding the Constitution and democratic values," said an official release.
These ordinances were promulgated to give legal shape to sweeping reforms done in different sectors under state of emergency following the 1/11 changeover amid a political crisis over election issues.
The committee sits in its next meeting Tuesday at 5pm at the same venue.
Presided over by committee chairman Advocate M Rahmat Ali, the meeting was attended by Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Barrister Shafique Ahmed and committee members Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury, Tofail Ahmed, Suranjit Sengupta, Sheikh Fazlul Karim Salim , Dr Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir, M Sayedul Huq, M Fazle Rabbi Mia, Rashed Khan Menon, M Mojibar Rahman, ABM Ruhul Amin Hawlader, MK Anwar, Abdul Matin Khasru, M Nurul Islam Sujan and on invitation Barrister Fazle Noor Tapash MP.
Law Secretary Kazi Habibul Awal and other officials concerned were present.

US to support BD in combating regional terrorism: Moriarty

UNB, Dhaka

The United States will extend support to Bangladesh government's effort to combat regional terrorism, US Ambassador James Moriarty said here Saturday.
He made the statement talking to reporters when he was asked about the formation of South Asian Anti-terrorism Taskforce proposed by the newly elected government of Sheikh Hasina.
The US diplomat, who attended a basketball match at the basketball ground of Rajarbagh Police Lines, was asked about their view of the just-adopted parliamentary resolution on trial of the war criminals of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, which the then American government had opposed.
"It's an internal matter of Bangladesh," the envoy said.
Members of Bangladesh Police and US Embassy participated in the Friendship Basketball Competition.
Inspector General of Police Nur Muhammad watched the match as chief guest on the occasion.

12 lakh people afflicted with tobacco related diseases every year in BD

Staff Correspondent

At least 12 lakh people are afflicted with different kinds of tobacco related diseases which causes death and disability as well as loss of Tk five crore for medical treatment every year.

This was disclosed at a discussion meeting on 'Tobacco Control Act and Development' organised jointly by Bangladesh Anti-Tobacco Alliance, Save Environment Movement, "Pratysha"- Anti Drug Club, WBB Trust and Manobik at the National Press Club yesterday.

According to their study report, around 57,000 people aged between 30 and 35 years die due to tobacco related diseases in the country and 3,82,000 people are becoming disabled every year. Speakers at the discussion demanded imposition of ban on all sorts of tobacco related advertisements. Government and non-government officials, NGO and anti-tobacco alliance activists took part in the discussion with Abu Naser Khan, Chairman of Save Environment movement presiding over the discussion.

They also urged the government to enact an effective and result oriented Tobacco Control Act to protect the people from negative impact of tobacco. They said people from all walks of life will have to raise their voices against tobacco products and its advertisement. Otherwise, the country will lose around Tk 2,600 crore every year as many people are going abroad for treatment suffering from different tobacco related chronic diseases.

During the discussion, they made some recommendations including keeping premises of all education and health institutions and terminals of buses, launches and ferries free from smoking and announcing other public places as no smoking zones. In order to reduce the numbers of smokers and discourage them, the government should implement its existing Anti-Tobacco Acts and immediately enact more effective rules to save the young generation from tobacco addiction.

While addressing the meeting, SM Mahbubur Rahman Senior Assistant Secretary to Finance Ministry said on the basis of existing Act, a mobile court led by a magistrate had lodged around 350 cases against several smokers and fined Tk 50 each for smoking in public places. But these cases are not yet sent before the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate Court for trial. If the law enforcers do not cooperate with us how will it be possible to make our mission a success," he said expressing his grave concern.

He said several monitoring teams led by Cabinet Division and Establishment Ministry will have to be formed at grassroots level to keep the control on tobacco products, he added.

SRILANKA:

LTTE, Sri Lanka and struggle for controlling Indian Ocean

Finally LTTE got routed out when Sri Lankan army ran over its last bastion and main operation center, Mullaittivu bringing an end to their decade-long domination of the country's North. The Sri Lankan army commander Lt. Gen. Sarath Fonseka said the 25-year-old bloody ethnic separatist war was 95 percent over. It is a big reason for Sri Lankans to be jubilant specially when they are about to celebrate their Independence Day on February 4th but on the other hand the restlessness of India over this new development can be well understood primarily due to her own internal equation of ethnic politics.

In South Africa : Erroneous assertion of LTTE exposed

The erroneous assertion of the LTTE as involved in a 'Liberation war for self determination' was exposed. Sri Lanka's High Commissioner in Pretoria pointed out that the recent statement by the African National Congress has erroneously termed the terrorists activities of the LTTE as a War of Liberation for Self Determination. Sri Lanka's High Commissioner Anura Rajakaruna in missive said that the recent statement made by the ANC is against the aspirations of a friendly country which championed the cause of the majority people of South Africa in several international fora during the apartheid period. He reminded the position taken by Sri Lanka at the Conference of Foreign Ministers of Non-Aligned Countries in Lima in August 1975, in demanding that apartheid South Africa strictly respect the unity and territorial integrity of the territory while also denouncing the creation of so called "homelands".

Allow the innocent Tamil civilians to go for their safety – a cross section of Swedish nationals appeal to the Tamil Tigers

Mon, 2009-02-02 15:42

By K.T.Rajasingham

A cross section of Swedish nationals when contacted expressed shock and awe over the prevailing critical situation in Sri Lanka’s Northern region of Vanni, where more than 200,000 innocent Tamil civilians are being held as hostages and as human shield by the separatist Tamil outfit - Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. India, as well as numerous international organizations have urged the Government of Sri Lanka as well as the LTTE to allow the Tamil civilians trapped in the war zone to leave for their safety. Sri Lanka Government designated a 35-square-kilometre "No Fire zone" inside LTTE -held territory where it says civilians can shelter without fear of military bombardment. President Mahinda Rajapakse had given the Tigers time until last Saturday night to provide civilians safe passage out of the 300-square-kilometre (110-square-mile) jungle area still under the LTTE control.

Sri Lankan Minister emphasises on business connectivity for an enhanced bilateral relations between Latvia and Lanka

Mon, 2009-02-02 03:22

The meltdown of the world economy has been well fielded by Sri Lanka with safeguards in place making the economy resilient, to which the GSP plus facility also has contributed positively and its continuation together with and the increased integration of Sri Lanka products into the EU market are important, stated Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollgama during his discussions on with Kaspars Gerharde, Minister of Economics of Latvia.

Tamil Nadu Congress Leaders’: Last ditch appeal to free Tamil civilians held by the Tamil Tigers

Sun, 2009-02-01 14:48

By K.T.Rajasingham

Tamil Nadu leaders of the Indian National Congress have showed serious concern over the safety of the innocent Tamil civilians held as hostages by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, as the 48-hour time limit provided by the Sri Lanka President expires. Tamil Nadu state Indian National Congress Leader K.V.Thangabalu and D.Sutharsanam, the Leader of the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly, when talking to "Asian Tribune" separately, they emphasized that Tamil Tigers should release the innocent Tamil civilians held by them without any further delay.

Latvia – Lanka to establish bilateral relationship on a firm foundation

Sun, 2009-02-01 05:31

Latvia being an emerging country in the world arena and a member state of the European Union (EU) is an important link in its foreign policy, which would enhance Sri Lanka's relations both bilaterally and within Europe, observed Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama, during the bilateral talks held recently in Riga, Latvia with his counterpart Maris Riekstins. Minister Bogollagama is on a two day visit to Latvia, which marks the first such visit at a high political level. He elaborated that Sri Lanka looks forward to strengthening of bilateral relations with Latvia and sharing of that country's synergies, with Sri Lanka.

United Nations provided US $ 125 Million for Sri Lanka's Development in 2008

Sun, 2009-02-01 02:50

The United Nations in Sri Lanka has provided US$125 million in development aid to Sri Lankans in 2008. Speaking after the first joint Annual Review of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF), Mr. Neil Buhne, UN Resident Humanitarian Coordinator said that the funds represented the collective efforts of the UN to support the Sri Lankan government over 5 years in its efforts to meet the Millennium Development Goals and the National Development Plan.

The damage India & LTTE have caused to Sri Lanka

Sun, 2009-02-01 02:01

By Shenali Waduge

If we are confused as to why Sri Lanka was indiscriminately projected as suffering from "disunity", "ethnic rivalries" "genocide" there is only one answer to a proper understanding of the problem – India. "India's covert operation camouflaged a terrorist movement to promote ethnic tensions." To how many occurred the need to wonder how Sri Lanka can be categorized as a nation suffering from an "ethnic" problem when there is enough evidence to prove India's involvement in arming LTTE and other militants in Sri Lanka? The covert operation allowed India to take diplomatic leverage of the situation and advance the opportunity to advocate a "political solution" in the form of an Indo-Lanka Agreement and the 13th amendment to the Constitution that amalgamated the North and East to India's advantage and later to secretly author a Cease Fire Agreement brokered by Norway. Yet, despite all the political bullying Sri Lanka has undergone the nation & its people are still magnanimous enough to call India "our friend" and mean it too.

UN Secretary General welcomes Sri Lankan President's announcement of Safe Passage civilians held by Tamil Tigers

Sat, 2009-01-31 05:02

The UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon welcomes Sri Lanka President Mahinda Rajapaksa's announcement of safe passage for all civilians trapped in the area of intense fighting in the North to a secure environment. However, he continues to show concerned by the threat to the estimated 250,000 civilians caught in the area, who are in close proximity to the fighting. He urges the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to do all in their power to make this safe passage a reality, and to ensure the protection of civilians in accordance with International Humanitarian Law.

LTTE's atrocities exposed while explaining Sri Lanka Government's efforts to liberate the North

Sat, 2009-01-31 03:20

Sri Lanka Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama has said greater understanding of the respective positions and the need to continue to engage in a dialogue was achieved, through his interactions in Brussels aimed at supporting Sri Lanka's continued retention of the GSP+ facility with the relevant European Commissioners. He said while Sri Lanka would not agree to subject itself to any intrusion of its sovereignty, it was ready for continued engagement and dialogue on any concerns the EU might have regards Sri Lanka benefitting from this facility. The Foreign Minister made these observations during a question and answer session that followed an address to members of the European Parliament, hosted by the 'Friends of Sri Lanka' Group.

London Cabs To Promote Sri Lanka

Sat, 2009-01-31 02:29

The London Branch of the Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau activated a campaign under the rebranding exercise at key destinations world over, where 27 taxi cabs were branded with images depicting Sri Lanka. The creative execution depicts the new branding that will advertise the resplendent isle throughout the world. This campaign was facilitated by Cabvert, the company which is promoting its own brand of Cabvertising, which includes the utilization of the exterior as well as interior of cabs. Previous research suggests that on average 152 people per day travel in a taxi cab, and one can conclude that for every passenger travelling in each cab, the cab is viewed at least 250 times more, said Director, UK & Ireland, of the Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau, Sanjika Perera. Taxi advertisements are easier to read because they are eye-level, he further added.

UN human rights chief deplores worsening situation for civilians in Sri Lanka

Sat, 2009-01-31 00:51

Daya Gamage – US National Correspondent Asian Tribune

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay said Thursday 29 January she was deeply concerned by reports of the rapidly deteriorating conditions facing a quarter of a million civilians trapped in the conflict zone in northern Sri Lanka, and of alleged human rights abuses and a significant number of civilian casualties, as well as the huge displacement. Ms. Pillay also expressed concern at the highly restricted access to the Vanni region for aid agencies and impartial outside observers, including journalists and human rights monitors.

Tamil Tigers continues to forcibly hold the innocent civilians without allowing them to cross into safe areas

Fri, 2009-01-30 17:17

Tamil Tigers continue to hold on the innocent Tamil civilians as human shield without allowing them to leave to safe areas through the "No Fire Zone" corridor. Sri Lankan Army sources told "Asian Tribune" only 9 people managed to flee yesterday into the Army controlled area though LTTE fired at them while fleeing. Also sources told that LTTE have at last allowed 170 civilians who were injured and languishing for treatment to the Army controlled area and they have holding on with another 380 injured civilians who urgently need treatment.

Rajan Asirwatham – the new Chairman of Tourism Steering Committee

Fri, 2009-01-30 06:37

Mr. Rajan Asirwatham has been appointed by Milinda Moragoda, Minister of Tourism as the new Chairman of the Steering Committee that has been setup to monitor and spearhead the World Bank assisted Tourism Sector Development & Community Empowerment Project with effect from January 2009. Mr. Asirwatham replaces Mr. Renton de Alwis who was the first Chairman appointed for the committee who stepped down for personal reasons.

EU Presidency was told of Sri Lanka's abiding commitment to civilians' safety in the north

Fri, 2009-01-30 03:44

Sri Lanka Foreign Minister Bogollagama reaffirmed Sri Lanka's total commitment to the safety and security of civilians in the conflict area in the north and stated that the government military action is only aimed at empowering people through a political process. The Minister made this observation when he met the Presidency of the European Union (EU) represented by the Foreign Minister of the Czech Republic Mr. Karrel Schwarzenberg in Brussels on Tuesday.

UNICEF clarifies vehicle recovered from LTTE does not belongs to them

Fri, 2009-01-30 03:29

UNICEF in a statement said yesterday that "a Toyota double cab" which the Army says it has seized from the LTTE does not belong to UNICEF. The statement claims that "An Army website had erroneously claimed the vehicle belonged to UNICEF." The press statement went on to clarify, "UNICEF does not have any double cabs in its fleet. However in the past years UNICEF has donated a large number of this type of vehicle to Government partners such as the Ministry of Healthcare and Nutrition, Ministry of Education, National Water Supply and

Drainage Board and the Ministry of Social Services and Social Welfare to support their activities.

Belgium was warned of the dangers of LTTE front organization operating within the territory

Thu, 2009-01-29 03:38

Sri Lanka Foreign Minister pointed out the danger of LTTE front organizations operating within the territory of Belgium and in Europe as a whole, which collect funds on behalf of the LTTE, carry out illegal smuggling operations and other criminal activities. In a meeting with the recently appointed Belgian Prime Minister Herman Van Rompuy, Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama pointed out that with the steadily diminishing fighting capabilities of the LTTE, the danger of these operatives in Europe seeking asylum for remaining cadres in Sri Lanka, the possibility of the increase of criminal and subversive activity within Europe was also highlighted. It was appreciated that Belgium shares with Sri Lanka the policy of zero tolerance towards terrorism.

Sri Lanka Assures India: To Provide Adequate Security Measures To Civilians Trapped In War Zone

Issues of Civilians safety dominated the discussion held yesterday in Colombo between the Sri Lanka President and Indian External Affairs Minister . Sri Lanka President assured the visiting Indian Minister that Sri Lankan forces would provide the necessary safety precautions for civilians to leave through the demarcated safety zones to the Government controlled areas. India's External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee who rushed to Colombo, on an unscheduled two-day visit on the invitation of Sri Lanka President Mahinda Rajapaksa met with Rajapaksa immediately upon his arrival for talks, as the LTTE fighters struggled to defend their last remaining strongholds in Puthukkudiyruppu and Viswamadhu located in the country's northern sprawling Vanni region.

Sri Lanka Tourism Ministry's 2008 Travel and Tourism Award Ceremony

Wed, 2009-01-28 05:15

The second successive Presidential Awards for Travel and Tourism was held on 26 January 2009, at BMICH, Colombo, with the participation of a distinguished gathering of industry personnel. The Chief Guest of the award ceremony, Prime Minister Rathnasiri Wickramanayake, was accompanied by the Minister of Tourism, Milinda Moragoda, Deputy Minister of Tourism, Faiszer Musthapha, Member of Parliament Arjuna Ranathunga and the organizing committee. Continuing on the success of the inaugural Travel and Tourism Awards held last year, the Ministry of Tourism, in partnership with Sri Lanka Tourism, organized the Presidential Awards for Travel and Tourism 2008.

Sri Lanka Foreign Minister urged European Union to view developments in Sri Lanka

Wed, 2009-01-28 02:54

Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama has called upon the European Union to view developments in Sri Lanka and the Tamil diaspora within a post –LTTE paradigm which better reflect the new ground realities in Sri Lanka and to become partners in Sri Lanka's post-conflict development. The Minister made this call when he met the European Commissioner responsible for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy Benita Ferrero-Waldner, and the European Commissioner responsible for Trade Catherine Ashton, in Brussels on Monday (26 January 2009). Sri Lanka's Ambassador to Belgium, Luxembourg and the European Union Ravinatha Aryasinha and Advisor to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on International Legal Affairs Dr. Rohan Perera were associated with the Minister.

Pranab Mukerjee expected this evening in Colombo

Tue, 2009-01-27 18:14

Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee in response to an Invitation by the President of Sri Lanka is expected to arrive in Colombo at 6 pm this evening to meet with President Mahinda Rajapaksa. Minister Mukherjee's visit takes place at a time of repeated successes in the Sri Lanka's security operations to free the civilian population from the terror of the LTTE. According to a press statement released by the Sri Lanka Foreign Ministry, "(the visit) is in keeping with the tradition of regular, frank and constructive dialogue between India and Sri Lanka at the highest levels of political leadership, on important matters of mutual interest."

Pranab visiting Colombo Tuesday to pacify Karunanidhi, Spiritual Guru Ravi Shankar also plans a 'ceasefire' mission

Tue, 2009-01-27 15:28

By M Rama Rao, India Editor, Asian Tribune, Delhi

India's External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee is visiting Colombo on Tuesday as much in response to domestic political compulsions as the larger humanitarian concerns thrown up by the last phase of Eelam War IV. A much sought after Indian spiritual guru, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar is also planning a visit to Colombo and Vanni. "I will try and bring about a ceasefire between the two sides", Ravi Shankar, who heads his own 'Art of Living' mission said on Monday but did not say when he would undertake the journey. He had visited Sri Lanka last year and met Prabhakaran and President Rajapaksa though nothing much came of the exercise

In Sri Lanka: A Gateway to Reconciliation Process

Tue, 2009-01-27 07:36

By Dr Nazeem Seyed Mohamed

The news report in the Asian Tribute, an interview with the President of Sri Lanka awakened my interest. The information in that interview is closely associated with my interest and belief. And I noted that the President of Sri Lanka made a gesture illuminating his skill of his statesmanship, much admirable. He invites the strong representatives of the Tamil population in India, i.e., the Tamil leaders from Tamil Nadu to come to Sri Lanka and help the IDP

(Internally Displaced People) in the area under the LTTE command so that they can move to safe places, places not directly in the war zone. I sincerely hope that these leaders will accept the invitation and help those who are in need today. In this way they will do more than words and save the lives of children, old people, women and men-all in severe need today.

Tamil Nadu TVs on mischievous campaigns against Sri Lanka and Sri Lankan armed forces

Tue, 2009-01-27 07:00

Tamil Language televisions from Chennai are bent on a scurrilous disinformation campaign against Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan armed forces. "Ayngaran" TV belonging to M. Karunanidhi, Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu and the "Sun" TV belonging to Kalanidhi Maran, the grandson of Karunanidhi, are in the forefront of a mischievous campaign against Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan armed forces. Minister Keheliya Rambukwella, Sri Lanka Government's spokesman for Defense and National security said that the vicious campaign unleashed by these two Tamil language televisions from Chennai, judging by all norms, have exceeded the tolerance limits and are condemnable.

Sri Lankan troops already entered Visvamadu

Tue, 2009-01-27 05:16

Sri Lankan armed forces have already entered Visvamadu, one of the few remaining pockets under the control of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the Tamil separatist outfit, which is involved in a battle with Sri Lankan armed forces, for their survival in Vanni. Sources in the 58 Division told "Asian Tribune" that on Sunday they were knocking at the gates of Visvamadu despite resistance by the Tamil Tigers, but yesterday soldiers have entered and they expect to take control of Visvamadu in a day or two. Defense sources revealed that soldiers belonging to 57 Division who are placed next to the 58 Division are also on the borders of Visuamadu.

Sri Lanka's Path to Victory: A Story of Leadership, Tactic and Sacrifice

Tue, 2009-01-27 02:20

By Sanjeewa Karunaratne

No one would have believed in their wildest dreams that the Sri Lankan military had the capability of defeating the number one terrorist organization in the world, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). A well-organized, heavily-funded and deadly terrorist outfit that ran a mini state in the northern parts of Sri Lanka has lost its last stronghold: Mullaitivu. The only terrorist organization to have an infantry, a naval force and an air wing was responsible for the largest number of suicide attacks in the world, has used state-of-the-art weaponry, including surface to air (SAM) missiles. Nevertheless, President Rajapaksha and his government have taken its "war against terrorism" to the very end as the LTTE is fighting an existential battle.

Rajapaksa invites Karunanidhi to visit Jaffna, Vanni, to advise Tigers to free human shield

In a smart diplomatic initiative, President Mahinda Rajapaksa Sunday invited 'veteran' Indian leader Karunanidhi, also his arch rival Jayalalithaa Jayaram of AIADMK to visit Jaffna and Vanni and personally appeal to LTTE to release the Tamilians held as human shield at gun point. "We are ready to provide safe corridors for the civilians to go through the army control

areas to safer places, but it is now up to the Tamil Tigers to 'release' the civilians", the President told the "Asian Tribune" in an exclusive interview as the troops triumphantly marched into Mullaitivu and cornered the Tigers to a small stretch of some 300 sq km, two years after the ceasefire broke down and Eelam War IV started.

Mullaitivu captured: Tamil Tigers lost their last sea front

Mon, 2009-01-26 07:09

By Ruwan Weerakoon in Colombo

Brigadier Nandana Udawatta, entered into Mullaitivu, LTTE's main garrison town, and have gained total control over the Mullaittivu Township after completing the mop up operations conducted in the area by yesterday evening - 25 January. In a TV appearance, Sri Lanka Army Commander Lt Gen Sarath Fonseka Officially announced that the Army has captured Mullaitivu. Recapturing the Mullaittivu town which had been dominated by the LTTE for the last 13 years marks the significant milestone in the war against terrorism launched to free the entire country from grip of LTTE.

Sri Lankan troops entered Mullaitivu

Sun, 2009-01-25 17:41

By Ruwan Weerakoon in Colombo

Sri Lankan troops on Sunday (today) fought their way into Mullaittivu, the last town held by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, who are holed up in the northeast of Sri Lanka. Army Commander Lt Gen Sarath Focseka told "Asian Tribune," when contacted, that troops belongs to the 59 Division has already entered Mullaitivu. This is the final known urban stronghold of the LTTE, and the Sri Lankan forces entered the township via boats, a military official said. The township which is located on the eastern coastal line of the island is expected to come under government control after a lapse of 13 years.

Sri Lanka President wishes Dr. Manmohan Singh a restful recovery

Sun, 2009-01-25 16:00

Sri Lanka President Mahinda Rajapaksa today (25), by sending a get well message, wished Dr. Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister of India, a restful recovery from the surgical procedure. "We wish you a restful recovery, so that you return with further strengthened good health to your successful and visionary service, for the progress and prosperity of India and her people," the President said in his message.

The Danish Prime Minister commends Lankan Security Forces for their success in combatting Terrorirsm in Sri Lanka

Sun, 2009-01-25 09:17

Anders Fogh Rasmussen The Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen expresses his strong commitment to democracy, rule of law and human rights commended the Sri Lankan security forces for successfully combating terrorism in Sri Lanka. Ambassador Ranjith Jayasooriya, resident in Stockholm, who is also accredited to the Kingdom of Denmark met the

Danish Prime Minister on Wednesday 23rd January, 2009 after the Prime Minister's Annual Meeting with the Ambassadors accredited to Denmark in the 'Nordatlandens Brygge' historical building of the Prime Minister's Office in Copenhagen in Denmark.

Britain: LTTE must be dealt as terrorists

Sun, 2009-01-25 04:32

Britain, a country that has been a victim of terrorism of all sorts, made a bold a statement recently highlighting the right of the government of Sri Lanka to defeat it militarily while emphasizing the need of a political solution in the long run. The statement issued by the Secretary of State for Foreign & Commonwealth Affairs on Sri Lanka on 21 January 2009, clearly says that it does not recognize the LTTE as the representatives of the Tamil population in the island nation.

Constitutional Ministry seeks Federal Solutions?

Sat, 2009-01-24 07:54

By Gomin Dayasri

The Select Committee report under the chairmanship of Vijitha Herath traced the origins of the relationship between the Burghof Foundation (BF) and the Ministry of Constitutional affairs which resulted in two agreements of 2001 and 2006 which was the central issue examined by the parliamentarians at a Select Committee. The first Agreement of 2001 was during the period of Chandrika Kumaranatunga where G.L.Pieris was the Minister and the second Agreement was in 2006 under the Mahinda Rajapakse regime with D.E.W. Gunasekera, as the Minister. The Select Committee with heavy government representation has had the courage to be more critical of the 2006 Agreement which took place during the lifetime of the present government with D.E.W. Gunasekera as the Minister.

Russia and Sri Lanka to work together to enhance bilateral cooperation and in the fight against global terrorism

Sri Lanka and Russia have expressed their firm commitment to the global fight against terrorism and agreed to enhance interaction in multilateral fora in this regard. It was decided in principle to work towards increasing high level visits between the two countries culminating at the highest level. In accordance with the Protocol on Inter- Ministerial joint consultations between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Sri Lanka and the Russian Federation, Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Sri Lanka, Dr. Palitha T.B. Kohona, held a series of political consultations with the Director of the Asian Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Mr. Alexander G Maryasov on January 15, 2009.

Sri Lankan President commends Obama's shared interest in combating terrorism

Sat, 2009-01-24 02:59

Sri Lanka President Mahinda Rajapakse in messages of good wishes to the US President Barack Obama pointed out that Sri Lanka and the US share common democratic values and perspectives on a broad range of political issues, particularly in combating terrorism. "The role the United States is playing in achieving peace in Sri Lanka through the consolidation of democratic institutions and promoting economic development has earned our admiration and gratitude," President Rajapaksa said.

LTTE-sponsored Rally in Washington: Rallying the West to reverse territorial loss in Sri Lanka

Fri, 2009-01-23 11:39

Daya Gamage – US National Correspondent Asian Tribune – A Political Memo

LTTE professionals, operatives, acolytes and sympathizers in the Western World especially in the United States have stepped up their psychological warfare against the Sri Lankan state to induce policy-makers in the West that Sri Lanka government's current battle is nothing but a genocidal onslaught against the country's Tamil minority in the guise of combating terrorism in holding a rally in front of the Indian Embassy in Washington on Friday, January 23.

Sri Lanka: 2nd Successive Travel and Tourism Awards Ceremony

Fri, 2009-01-23 06:08

Continuing on the success of the inaugural Travel and Tourism Awards held last year, the Ministry of Tourism, in partnership with Sri Lanka Tourism, has organized the Travel & Tourism Awards 2008, which is awaited with much enthusiasm by the industry. The Minister of Tourism, Milinda Moragoda identified the need to award the tourism sector for its contribution, as there was no award scheme prior to this. Today, the awards are recognized as the highest accolade for individuals and organizations whose outstanding contributions play a significant role in the success of the Sri Lankan travel and tourism industry.

EU Parliamentary Delegation Led by Robert Evans Ended Finger Pointing at Sri Lanka Government

Fri, 2009-01-23 06:02

EU Parliamentary delegation that visited Sri Lanka in 2008 has ended its blame-game for their inability to visit the East of Sri Lanka in their 'Explanatory Statement.' Earlier, European Parliamentary Delegation led by MEP Robert Evans visited Sri Lanka in July 2008. They alleged at a press conference in Colombo that the Sri Lankan Government prevented them from visiting the Eastern Province. But now, in an 'explanatory statement' to the Mission's report tabled on 21 January acknowledged that "it is convinced that both the Mission of Sri Lanka to the EU and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Sri Lanka, at various levels, as well as other senior members and representatives of the Government, genuinely deployed every effort to facilitate safe and secure air passage for the Delegation to the East during the July visit".

Sri Lanka: UN Calls on the Tamil Rebels to Ensure Free Passage World Body's Staff

Fri, 2009-01-23 05:29

The United Nations has issued its strongest possible protest to the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for refusing to allow the world body's national staff and dependents who were travelling with a UN aid convoy to return from Sri Lanka's northern Vanni area. "The staff are part of a UN convoy which traveled to the Vanni on Friday, 16 January, delivering urgent food and emergency supplies to displaced populations," according to a statement issued by the Office of the UN Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator in Colombo. Due to fighting between the LTTE and Government forces, the convoy has only been able to move safely today. "The UN calls on the LTTE to meet their responsibilities and immediately permit all UN staff and dependents to freely move from this area.

India should give optional citizenship rights to Sri Lankan Tamils

Thu, 2009-01-22 17:12

By Shenali Waduge

Whether Sri Lanka likes it or not India remains a menacing presence in the South Asian region. With just 22miles separating the two nations from the Palk Strait, history will tell that relations have never been without traces of discontent on either side. The situation presently has been made precarious by South Indian politicians who are using Sri Lanka as a pedestal to advance their political campaigns and secure broader handouts from India's Central Government. Using Sri Lanka as a domestic "football" in Indian politics is not done and cannot go on forever. It is obvious that "some" Sri Lankan Tamils including "some" Sri Lankan Tamil politicians are of the opinion that India is the sole answer to the "problems" of the Sri Lankan Tamils. In a scenario where we have South Indian politicians thinking that it is their "duty" to "protect" the Sri Lankan Tamils and some Sri Lankan Tamils who feel that "only" India can provide them "security" it would make perfect sense for the GOSL and India to seek a census and for India to provide citizenship to "these" Sri Lankan Tamils in India.

Some strategic security implications of Sri Lanka

Thu, 2009-01-22 16:52

By Dimuth Gunawardena

The visit of Indian Foreign Secretary, Shiv Shankar Menon, to Sri Lanka was said to be "routine in nature". Such description is typical diplomat-speak and if 'true nature' is to be obtained, one needs to analyse the visit in the context of present and future geopolitical configurations and their implications for Sri Lanka subsequent to the now imminent eradication of LTTE terrorism. For example, the recent calls for developing the North with India playing a major role in it can very well indicate an Indian attempt to lure Sri Lanka into that country's financial grip. There is more to it than that of course, so we shall get back to this issue later.

Therapeutic effects of flavonoids from Ceylon green tea in the prevention of stroke

Thu, 2009-01-22 16:45

By Dr. Ranil de Silva & Prof. Y.Z. Zhu

On average, one heart attack occurs every four seconds and a stroke occurs every five seconds worldwide (WHO) and also, 20 million people suffer from stroke each year, of which five million die. Of those 15 million who survive, five million are disabled. In succession to diseases of the heart and cancer stroke is the next big killer. Stroke occurs as a result of reduced blood supply to the brain which results in inadequate delivery of oxygen to it resulting in ischemia. It has been reported that high oxidative stress is involved in ischemic diseases, which include ischemic stroke and neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's disease.

Inform the world of our progress to democracy – President to Sri Lanka Consuls

Mon, 2009-01-19 16:33

Mahinda Rajapaksa"It is time for you to inform the world of the progress we are making towards restoring democracy and freedom in the north, and counter the ill informed charges being made about the plight of the innocent Tamil people there," said President Mahinda Rajapaksa addressing Sri Lanka's Honorary Consuls abroad at a special meeting and working session for them organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Addressing the Hony. Consuls at the Presidential Secretariat today (19), the President said: "It is your special task to make it known that the sufferings of the Tamil people in the north are those imposed by the LTTE who falsely claim to be their liberators, but are in fact their biggest oppressors."

Indian Foreign Secretary meets Rajapaksa, discusses 'political' situation

Sun, 2009-01-18 05:11

Mahinda with Menon Amidst indications that LTTE chief Velupillai Prabhakaran has escaped to a coastal hideout in Penang, Malaysia, Indian Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon Saturday discussed the 'political' situation with President Mahinda at Kandy, a day after he arrived in Sri Lanka on an unscheduled 2-day visit to the Island country. Both sides took recourse to diplomatisque to remain vague on what had been discussed at the meeting that lasted about 90-minutes. Both sides took recourse to diplomatisque to remain vague on what had been discussed at the meeting that lasted about 90-minutes. They discussed 'issues' of bilateral interest and ''exchanged' views on the current developments' in the war-ravaged north, an official release said. This is a giveaway that progress of Eelam war figured prominently.

Sri Lanka-based Burmese political weblog wins "Best Asia Blog" award for 2008

Sun, 2009-01-18 04:41

Daya Gamage – US Bureau Asian Tribune

If one's life is threatened for expressing ones views of one's country of birth through the mass media get into another country to create a 'weblog' or 'internet newspaper' which can have an impact on the international community. Here in the United States the Department of States' research and intelligence unit 24/7 keeps track of all the newspapers published in every corner of this globe and what every weblog and internet media say not only about the United States but also about other nations and their governments. Taking note of what is expressed in the internet the United States Department of State takes note and acts on those. In fact, the Department shares the information with the U.S. Congress.

Lanka's Faustian Bargain

Sun, 2009-01-18 03:25

By Tisaranee Gunasekara

Total subjugation to the LTTE is the price Vellupillai Pirapaharan demanded of and extracted from the Tamil people, in return for taking on the Lankan state. Is an equally self-destructive "quid pro quo" being imposed on the Sinhalese by the Rajapakse administration? Is the South being asked to consent to the steady undermining of democracy, rule of law and civilised norms, in return for the regime's willingness to take on the LTTE? In a self critical piece of seminal importance titled "War on Terror was wrong", Britain's Foreign Secretary David Miliband moved away from the 'them vs. us' premise of George W Bush's 'Global War against Terror', criticising the practice of drawing "the battle lines as a simple binary struggle between moderates and extremists or good and evil" "The Guardian"– 15.1.2009).

In Sri Lanka- Tobacco kills 20,000 people annually

Sun, 2009-01-18 02:21

By Peiris Manjari in Colombo

"About 11,000 prosecutions have been made in regard to violation of the regulations of the Tobacco and Alcohol Act during the year 2007 and about 17 million rupees have been collected in the form of fines," said, Professor Carlo Fonseka, the Chairman of the National Authority on Tobacco and Alcohol (NATA), addressing a gathering at the BMICH at a ceremony held parallel to the exhibition organized by the Medical faculty of the Sri Jayawardenapura University, Nugegoda.

UN Demands LTTE to Free Tamils

Sat, 2009-01-17 05:44

The United Nations is increasingly concerned for the well-being of tens of thousands of civilians caught up in the conflict raging in the northern Vanni area of Sri Lanka. "As fighting surrounds the areas towards which families have been displaced, and with few choices about where to move, they are increasingly susceptible to harm due to the fighting." Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs John Holmes said in a statement.

Indian Foreign Secretary commends Sri Lanka in combating terrorism

Sat, 2009-01-17 05:32

Indian Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon expressed lavishly his appreciation for the proactive role played by Sri Lanka both multilaterally and in the regional context in combating terrorism, and extended the unstinted support of the Indian government in this exercise. He emphasised that concerted and collective international action is needed in combating the scourge of trans-national terror. Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon who arrived in Colombo yesterday morning on a two-day visit, met Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama and other senior officials in Colombo. He is scheduled to meet Sri Lanka President Mahinda Rajapakse today in Kandy.

Sri Lanka a model for Third World – UNICEF

Sat, 2009-01-17 02:26

The UNICEF's State of the World's Children's Report 2009, released yesterday, said Sri Lanka's achievements in scaling up health services for mothers and infants and its success in slashing maternal and neonatal mortality rates has made the lower middle income country a model for other developing nations. 'Sri Lanka is a strong example of how the health and survival of mothers and their newborns are linked, and how many of the interventions that save new mothers' lives also benefit their infants,' the Report added. The country's efforts to empower and educate women together with providing essential heath services have been vital in saving the lives and mothers and infants.

Human Rights Watch determines 'end of ceasefire' in Sri Lanka cause for deterioration of human rights

Fri, 2009-01-16 03:28

Daya Gamage – US National Correspondent Asian Tribune

The Human Rights Watch annual report released here in Washington on Wednesday, January 14 in its assessment on Sri Lanka faults the Government of Sri Lanka's unilateral withdrawal from the ceasefire agreement with separatist Tamil Tigers deteriorated the human rights situation in the country. While mentioning the excesses of the LTTE in passing the report blames the government using emergency regulations for widespread arrests and detentions. HRW further states that government's removal of NGOs from the north of the country has created a humanitarian situation where the government was unable to provide adequate food to the growing refugees.

U.S. Government renovates seven schools and one hospital in former LTTE-controlled areas of Eastern Province

Fri, 2009-01-16 02:56

To improve the lives of Sri Lankans affected by the conflict, the U.S. Government, through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. Pacific Command, is rehabilitating five schools in Trincomalee District and one hospital and two schools in Batticaloa District. U.S. Government officials joined national, provincial and local education and health officials, community leaders, school and hospital staff, students and their families, and local residents this week for the official groundbreaking ceremonies to mark the beginning of the renovation and expansion projects in eight communities in Trincomalee and Batticaloa. All projects are scheduled to be completed by July 2009.

Conference of Heads Sri Lankan Mission in the Middle East held in Dubai

Fri, 2009-01-16 02:30

The first ever two day regional meeting of Sri Lankan Ambassadors in the Middle East was held in Dubai on 14 - 15 January, under the chairmanship of Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama. Eleven Sri Lankan Envoys participated at the meeting along with several government and private sector agencies having a broad range of interests in the region. The objective of the meeting was to prepare an Action Plan which would be implemented by Sri Lanka Missions in 2009 in a range of areas, all of which have a great bearing on many aspects of the country's economy.

Tigers holding civilians as human shields deplored by the United Nations

Thu, 2009-01-15 07:58

Senior UN officials have told the UN Security Council in New York that Tamil Tigers are using innocent Tamils as human shields. Speaking at the Security Council discussion on the subject of Protecting Civilians in Conflict situations, an annual item on Council Agenda, the Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Matters said that those trapped civilians are bottled up in a confined space and expressed deep concern that they are prevented from leaving by the Tamil Tigers. The intention of the Tigers is the possible use of civilians to render that area immune from military operations. The UN officials have also expressed the view that for those that are able to leave the Vanni while the Government has the right to screen them for identifying LTTE cadres, these should not restrict their freedom of movement.

Qatar to provide Arabic Language Training to Sri Lankan expatriates

Thu, 2009-01-15 02:50

Qatar has agreed to provide Arabic language training to Sri Lankans working in Qatar. It is expected at present there are about 130,000 Sri Lankan expatriates working in Qatar. Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister Rohitah Bogollagama pointed out that having an exposure to the Arabic language, the Minister said, would enable such personnel to interact even better and contribute immensely towards improving inter-personnel communication skills. Responding to the proposal made by the Sri Lankan Minister, the Minister of Awqaf, Endowments and Islamic Affairs agreed to set up a mechanism towards building an Islamic Centre in Sri Jayawardenapura, Kotte. On the final day of his official visit to Qatar, Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama met with key Ministers of the Government of the State of Qatar on the 12th of January.

Sri Lanka: US Government renovates five schools in Trincomalee district

Wed, 2009-01-14 02:38

The US Government, through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and U.S.Pacific Command, is rehabilitating five schools in Trincomalee District and one hospital and two schools in Batticaloa District. The groundbreaking ceremonies of USAID funded

renovations in five schools in former LTTE-controlled areas of Trincomalee District will take place this week.

Qatar urged to participate in Lanka's development

Wed, 2009-01-14 02:33

Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama who is on an official visit to the State of Qatar met with Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabor Al-Thani, Prime Minister of Qatar at the Emiri Diwan (Royal Palace) and urged Qatar participate in the development of Sri Lanka. Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabor Al-Thani who is also the Foreign Minister was given a detailed briefing on the current situation in Sri Lanka by Minister Bogollagama. Explaining the progress made by the security forces in the fight against terrorism, the Minister said that the LTTE was being roundly defeated in all fronts and this victory was being achieved due to the support given by the ordinary Tamil people who had been victims of the LTTE's reign of terror.

Sri Lanka Foreign Minister briefed the current situation and urged the Ruler of Qatar to invest in Sri Lanka

Tue, 2009-01-13 03:02

Sri Lanka's Minister Bogollagama when he met the Emir of Qatar, pointed out that LTTE was on rapid retreat militarily and no longer enjoyed the goodwill of the Tamil people who he said had been alienated from the national democratic and development agenda for an extended period of time by the LTTE. He underlined that the current military campaign of the Sri Lankan security forces had a zero tolerance policy on civilian casualty. Referring to developments in the Eastern Province, the Minister said that following the defeat of the LTTE in the province, democracy had taken strong root and the rule of law was very much in evidence there.

USG Washington statement condemns media attacks in Sri Lanka: Editor Wickrematunga killing cited as "Deplorable"

Sun, 2009-01-11 02:58

Daya Gamage – US National Correspondent

The United States Government issuing a statement in Washington through its State Department spokesman has almost pointed the finger on the direction of the Government of Sri Lanka when it condemned the assassination of Sunday Leader editor Lasantha Wickrematunga and the attack on SISIRA TV media outlet expressing shock to a situation emerged in this South Asian nation to silence independent and dissenting voices. The United States for a period of time has been alerting Sri Lanka not to allow the creation of a conducive atmosphere to suppress the dissenting independent voices that the Super Power felt was necessary for an overall solution of the national problem in Sri Lanka.

Citing Increasing Attacks, UN Urges Sri Lanka To Ensure Safety For Returnees

Sat, 2009-01-10 02:56

The United Nations refugee agency has called on the Government of Sri Lanka to ensure security for civilians in the eastern part of the strife-torn nation, citing a significant increase in

the number of killings, abductions and injuries in areas of return, including 24 civilian deaths recorded in November alone in the Batticaloa district. "We're also worried about the negative impact these security incidents may have on the sustainability of the return process," Ron Redmond, a spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) told reporters in Geneva. Most of the more than 200,000 people displaced during fighting between Government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the eastern districts of Trincomalee and Batticaloa have returned home over the past two years.

Sri Lanka President announces the capture of Elephant Pass and the opening of the A9 Route

Fri, 2009-01-09 21:16

Sri Lanka President Mahinda Rajapakse announced to the Nation the completion of the capture of Elephant Pass region and the freeing of A 9 Road from the terrorist elements. President said, "I address you today at a time when our heroic forces have achieved another great and historic victory. By this evening our troops have completely freed the Elephant Pass area from the LTTE. Similarly, bringing Point Pedro and Devundara (Dondra Head) together the A-9 route has been completely freed from the clutches of the LTTE." In his address to the nation he proudly announced that he was able to evict the terrorists from 90 percent of the territories held by the terrorist elements, and said, "We are now engaged in giving a new life to the unitary status of our country. We are enlivening democracy in our land. The defeat of terrorism means giving life to an honorable peace and freedom. We are dedicated to give our children the opportunity to travel freely from Devundara to any part of the country and for all our people, whether Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim Burgher, Malay or of any community to live together and in unity."

Commitment to a political solution reiterated in the aftermath of LTTE proscription

Fri, 2009-01-09 03:05

Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama has emphasized that the Government does not believe in a military solution to address the genuine grievances of the minority communities in Sri Lanka. On the contrary, it is firmly committed to a political solution in finding answers to these issues, which should be done in a spirit of give and take by all democratic forces in the country. The Minister made these remarks yesterday, while addressing the diplomatic corps based in Colombo at the Foreign Ministry.

Any organizations associated with LTTE too would be banned

Fri, 2009-01-09 03:00

Provisions regarding the banning of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam pointed out that it also provides for the banning of other organizations that are connected with or which are representing or acting on behalf of the banned organization known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. The provisions banning the LTTE clearly says,"in order to eliminate the scourge of terrorism from the world, it is necessary for all sovereign states to criminalize terrorism and proscribe without exception organizations engaged in the perpetration of terrorism."

Sri Lanka Foreign Minister condemns the killing of Sunday Leader Editor

Fri, 2009-01-09 02:14

Sri Lanka Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama has strongly condemned the murder of the prominent media personality and Editor of The Sunday Leader, Lasantha Wickrematunga on 08 January 2009. He denounced the killing unreservedly and said that the Government will leave no stone unturned to pursue the perpetrators of this heinous crime and will seek to bring them to justice.

India - Urged to assist to eradicate LTTE: To intervene militarily in case Sri Lanka fails to devolve powers to Tamils

Thu, 2009-01-08 07:40

Dr. Swamy India must assist Sri Lanka in eradicating the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a terrorist outfit. At the end of ridding the LTTE, Sri Lanka must come forward to implement proper devolution powers for the Tamils under the constitution of Sri Lanka. In case Sri Lanka fails to implement such powers to the Tamils, President Mahinda Rajapakse must be told in no uncertain terms that India reserves the right to intervene militarily. Above was the response by Dr. Subramanian Swamy to a question he posed about India's role – "What should India do now to secure Tamil human rights, since the Tamils are squeezed between the devil [LTTE] and the deep sea [Sinhala chauvinists]."

Vigil stepped up along Tamil Nadu coast

Thu, 2009-01-08 05:55

Ravikumar Balakrishnan in Chennai

Vigilance along the southern coast of Tamil Nadu has been stepped up by the state police in collaboration with other security agencies to prevent possible infiltration of LTTE cadres in the wake of the fall of the outfit's de facto capital Kilinochchi in Sri Lanka. Highly placed police sources ruled out any security threat to the state and said police and other agencies have been asked to be on "alert", step up vigilance and monitor the situation closely. "Right now, there is no security threat to the state... however, we have asked the police and other agencies to be on alert and post more police personnel in the coastal areas such as Rameswaram, which are in close proximity to Sri Lanka," the sources told.

Pro-LTTE parties to meet on Jan 10

Thu, 2009-01-08 05:29

Ravikumar Balakrishnan in Chennai

Viduthalai Chiruthaikal Kadchchi supremo, Thol. Thirumavalavan, in a statement, said that a meet would be convened on January 10 to discuss the atrocities of the Lankan Government against the Lankan Tamils and the means to put an end to it. Thirumavalavan has appealed to

all pro-LTTE parties to set aside political differences and join hands in the battle to save the Lankan Tamils from extinction. He added that the PMK chief, Dr. Ramadoss and DK chief Veeramani and Nedumaran have been briefed and consulted. And that other party chiefs too would be met with shortly

A Post Card from Sri Lanka: Challenges for 2009

Thu, 2009-01-08 03:16

By Raj Gonsalkorale

Presidents and Prime Ministers are supposed to lead, not just in military battles, but even more importantly in forging a vision for the people they are leading. George W Bush has failed very badly on both accounts. Tony Blair has left a mixed legacy. John Howard from Australia blew chances to make Australia great and wasted ten good years making the country more racist and intolerant. Barak Obama will inherit a near bankrupt America, a fading empire that thinks he could change everything by the 21st January, the day after his inauguration. George Bush's failure has made China the next super power, and we will have a lead country who cares little about its own human rights, caring much less about human rights in other countries. Dictators will have a field day as long as they make sure China's commercial interests are kept uppermost as their policy objectives.

Sri Lanka Government bans LTTE – the terrorists' outfit

Wed, 2009-01-07 23:27

By Ruwan Weerakoon in Colombo

At the Cabinet meeting held today, it has been decided to proscribe the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam – a terrorist outfit led by Velupillai Prabakaran. Minister Maithripala Sirisena said that at today's cabinet meeting, President Mahinda Rajapaksa has submitted a cabinet paper seeking the proscription of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Sri Lankan President in his cabinet paper pointed out that LTTE continues to hold thousands of Internally Displaced Civilians by force under their grip, as human shield, without allowing them to move for safe areas.

UN Says Lasting Peace in Sri Lanka Will Require Political Solution

Wed, 2009-01-07 05:37

The United Nations says that despite the recent military developments in Sri Lanka, it is convinced that lasting peace in the country will require a political solution. Asked for UN reaction to the military advances in Sri Lanka, UN spokesman Farhan Haq told "Asian Tribune", "We are following the military developments in Sri Lanka. We remain very seriously concerned about the impact of the increased fighting on the civilian population. We continue to call on all sides to comply with international humanitarian law, to ensure the safety and freedom of movement of civilians, to allow humanitarian organizations to do their work in safety and to reach persons who need assistance."

Attack on Sirasa media complex squarely condemned

Wed, 2009-01-07 05:31

The Tamil United Liberation Front has very strongly condemns the dastardly act of causing extensive damage to the buildings and causing immense damage to the most Modern Equipments belonging to very popular TV and Radio Stations, the Sirasa, Sakthi and the MTV. Also Sri Lanka Government too has strongly condemned the attack on the Sirasa media complex in Depanama, Pannipitiya, early this morning. Immediately after the news of the attack, President Mahinda Rajapaksa has ordered a full investigation into the incident and called on the Inspector General of Police to apprehend the culprits and bring them to court.

Sri Lankans in Italy to help the soldiers and help the Internally displaced Tamils in the Northern Province

Tue, 2009-01-06 02:55

Sri Lankans in Italy has come forward to help Sri Lankan soldiers who have decided to sacrifice their lives in order to protect the sovereignty of Sri Lanka, and the families of the soldiers. It was also further resolved that the Sri Lankan diaspora must help, both financially and materially, the internally-displaced Tamil people living in the Northern Province. Also Sri Lankans living in Italy decided to hold Special "pujas" in every Temple and Church on Sunday 11th January, wherever there is a concentration of Sri Lankans, in Italy, Cyprus and Greece, to commemorate the victory of Kilinochchi and offer the blessings to the President and the Armed Forces.

Sri Lanka calls for an immediate end to military action in the Gaza Strip

Tue, 2009-01-06 02:20

The Government of Sri Lanka notes with deep concern the continuing violence in the Gaza Strip. The escalation of the military action has resulted in further loss of civilian lives and the deterioration of the humanitarian situation, as well as increased tension in the region. Sri Lanka calls upon the parties concerned to end military action immediately and observe a ceasefire which would reduce the prevailing tension and lead to a conducive environment for negotiations. An end to military action would ease the considerable human suffering in the Gaza Strip.

Two Sri Lankans from Amparai beheaded in Saudi Arabia

Sun, 2009-01-04 07:09

Two Sri Lankan from Amparai districts were beheaded on last Friday in Saudi Arabia. The Sri Lankans were beheaded by the sword on Friday after being convicted of armed robbery and murdering a Sudanese accountant, the Saudi Arabian Interior Ministry said. Two Sri Lankan migrant workers T. Suthakaran from Amparai and Ganesh Meharaj from Kalmunai were found guilty of shooting dead and robbing one Mohammed al-Jakk Mohammed, who worked as a company accountant. Mohammed al-Jakk Mohammed was shot and killed as he walked out of a bank in Riyadh, after withdrawing Saudi Riyal 2 million in May 2006.

Sri Lanka's lack of strategic communication helps LTTE to influence International Community/rights groups

Sat, 2009-01-03 15:08

Daya Gamage – US National Correspondent Asian Tribune

With the fall of Tamil Tiger stronghold Kilinochchi in the north to Sri Lankan armed forces on Second of January 2009 Sri Lanka is on the march toward ending the territorial control of the Tigers in parts of this nation's north. The east was liberated last year and reconstruction, rehabilitation, trade and investment are currently in progress with a democratically elected provincial council in place. Taking over LTTE-controlled territory, according what President Rajapaksa told two representatives of the 'Asian Tribune' in September last year in a long conversation in New York, is not a total victory in a predominantly Tamil north unlike a somewhat easy victory in the ethnically mixed east.

Maldives to support Sri Lanka in its fight against terrorism

Sat, 2009-01-03 03:37

Visiting President of Maldives Mohamed Nasheed expressed his appreciation of the efforts being taken by President Rajapaksa to restore peace in Sri Lanka, and congratulated the President and Sri Lanka on the success in the Kilinochchi Operation, and also assured Sri Lanka of the fullest support of the Maldives in the fight against terrorism. It was agreed at the bilateral talks, that Sri Lanka and the Maldives looked forward to the further improvement of good relations between the two countries in several areas of activity, with importance being given to Sri Lankan assistance in the development of the structures and institutions of democracy in the Maldives.

LTTE retaliated to the loss of Kilinochchi by a suicide bomb explosion in Colombo

Fri, 2009-01-02 21:11

A female LTTE suicide bomber exploded herself in front of the Air Force camp in Slave Island , Colombo this evening causing heavy damages to a civilians bus plying from Moratuwa to Pettha (Jan 2). According to the available information, the suicide bomber has exploded her in front of the entrance of the Air Force camp down the C.A. Gardiner road around 5.15PM. Two person has been killed and at least 22 others suffered injuries. The injured have been rushed to the National Hospital, Colombo. It is said that LTTE has retaliated to the loss of Kilinochchi by making use of one of their female suicide bombers to explode in the busy civilian area, causing death and injuring 14 Air force personnel and 8 innocent civilians.

Importance of implementing Sri Lanka's agenda abroad highlighted

Fri, 2009-01-02 02:18

It is the primary duty of the Foreign Ministry and Sri Lankan Missions abroad to vigorously implement Sri Lanka's agenda in every aspect while discharging their duties and functions. Foremost among these responsibilities is the protection of the nation's sovereignty and

territorial integrity, which has been highlighted by Sri Lanka at every high level forum in the international arena. These observations were made by Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama, when he addressed the staff of the Ministry today (01 January 2009) at the Foreign Ministry.

Sri Lanka Permanent Representative to UNESCO

Thu, 2009-01-01 05:31

Mr Lionel Fernando presented the letter of accreditation as Ambassador, Permanent Delegate of Sri Lanka to UNESCO to Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO at the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris on December 31, 2008. After the presentation of credentials, Mr Fernando and Mr Matsuura held a brief discussion on UNESCO activities. Sri Lanka is a member of the UNESCO Executive Board.

Sri Lankans are urged to strengthen the hands of the Government - Foreign Minister

Thu, 2009-01-01 03:25

In his New Year message Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama has appealed to Sri Lankans - both home and abroad, to strengthen the hands of the Government to face challenges posed by terrorism to democracy, human rights and other fundamental values that the people of Sri Lanka dearly cherish and have for so long taken for granted. In his message he has clearly pointed out that the LTTE has time and again demonstrated its callous disregard for the sanctity of human life through its numerous cold-blooded attacks on civilians. The Foreign Minister further said, "The year ahead will be a challenging one for Sri Lanka as we prepare ourselves to cope with the adverse impact of the global economic downturn that has set in. In this context, I urge all our overseas Missions to rise to the challenge of securing new markets for our exports, while expanding our existing market share in the countries of their accreditation."

Tamilnadu - 2008

Thu, 2009-01-01 02:08

By Ravikumar Balakrishnan

The year 2008 maybe described as tumultuous and tortuous. A year of re-alignment, reunion and repercussions in the political arena, all in one way or the other connected to the Parliamentary polls to be held in 2009. We have a few headline snatchers for you. The Communists proved media speculation true by joining the AIADMK alliance after ditching the DMK-led DPA. Leaders of both the Left parties, the CPI and the CPI-M called on Jayalalithaa at her Poes Garden residence, where they were welcomed with a 'red' carpet, true to their color. Meanwhile, no day passed without a protest for the AIADMK. Issues ranging from leakage in drinking water pipes to inflation made Jayalalithaa to ask her party cadres to stage demonstrations.

Sri Lanka: Polling for the two provincial Councils to be held on the 'Thai Pongal Day'

Wed, 2008-12-31 23:48

Provincial elections in the Central and North Western Province has been scheduled for February 14, Saturday, the Commissioner of Elections announced. Nominations for the upcoming provincial council polls in the Central and North Western Provinces closed by noon today. He said 10 political parties and eight independent groups have filed nominations to contest the Kandy district. 12 political parties and eight independence groups have also presented nominations to contest the Matale district. 14 political parties and 10 independent groups will contest the Nuwara Eliya district in the Central Provincial Council.

LTTE, Sri Lanka and struggle for controlling Indian Ocean

Tue, 2009-02-03 07:41

By Farzana Shah

Finally LTTE got routed out when Sri Lankan army ran over its last bastion and main operation center, Mullaittivu bringing an end to their decade-long domination of the country's North. The Sri Lankan army commander Lt. Gen. Sarath Fonseka said the 25-year-old bloody ethnic separatist war was 95 percent over. It is a big reason for Sri Lankans to be jubilant specially when they are about to celebrate their Independence Day on February 4th but on the other hand the restlessness of India over this new development can be well understood primarily due to her own internal equation of ethnic politics.

NEPAL:

Funds no problem if utilized properly: Donor agencies

Minister for Finance Dr. Baburam Bhattarai has urged donor agencies to extend enthusiastic support towards the efforts of Nepalese in economical restructuring of the country at the wake of recent political transformation.

In a meeting of the representatives of various donor agencies and countries organised at the Ministry of Finance on Monday, Dr. Bhattarai stressed on the need to work in carefully for resolving the problems of the country at this post-conflict phase.

Representatives of donor agencies said that the government should ensure proper utilization of resources in order to receive expected foreign aid. Urging the government to take private sector into confidence in development, they assured that there would be no shortage of funds if the government can stop lack of transparency, corruption and lack of accountability.

"There should be a guarantee of proper utilization of the aid," said Bella Bird, Head of Office of DFID Nepal urging an immediate audit of the Peace Fund.

The government expects to collect NRs. 47 billion (US $ 610 million) in foreign aid and NRs. 19 billion (US $ 246 million) in loan in order to meet the ambitious budget of this fiscal year.

Minister Bhattarai thanked the donor agencies for their support in reconstruction and rehabilitation programmes and hoped for their continued support.

Fuel prices cut nominally

NOC to earn Rs. 290m per month

Notwithstanding a drastic dip in fuel prices in the international market, the Nepal Oil Corporation on Monday decreased fuel prices

nominally.

The Steering Committee of the state-run oil monopoly reduced price per litre of petrol by a meagre Rs. 3, diesel and kerosene by Rs. 2 and cooking gas by Rs 25.

With this decision, each litre of petrol will cost Rs. 77.50, diesel and kerosene to Rs. 57.50, while gas will cost Rs. 1125 per cylinder.

The corporation, which is the sole importer of petroleum products in the country, has also cut the price of aviation fuel by a mere Rs 5. for domestic flights.

"The corporation cut prices nominally to make up for the current loss and adjust prices with fuel prices in bordering Indian towns," said Purushottam Ojha, secretary at the Ministry of Commerce and Supplies.

The oil monopoly is currently under the total loss of Rs. 14.25 billion.

With the new prices, the state-owned corporation will make net profit of Rs. 290 million every month, officials said.

According to the corporation, the prices were set as per its policy to adjust fuel prices with crude prices in the international market.

Meanwhile, Petroleum Dealers' Association has demanded that the corporation adjust fuel prices with prices in the international market.

Organising a press meet on Monday, the association accused the corporation of hoodwinking commoners by maintaining that it is under loss.

"The corporation cries publicly when it incurs losses but keeps mum after making profit," said Saroj Pandey, chairman of the association. Pandey has demanded the formation of a petroleum regulatory board. According to him, such a regulatory board will fix the amount of profits to both the corporation and the dealers.

LCs come under RID scanner

PRITHVI MAN SHRESTHA

KATHMANDU, Feb 3 - The Revenue Investigation Department (RID) has recently asked all commercial banks to furnish details of letters of credit (LC) opened over the last one and half

years in order to oversee the transactions in foreign trade and control misappropriation of LCs.

Sending a letter to the Nepal Rastra Bank (NRB) the RID has recently requested the former to issue a circular to all commercial banks to furnish details of the LCs as soon as possible.

According to Rabindra Khanal, deputy director at the NRB, in response to the request from RID, the central bank has sent letters to the concerned financial institutions on Jan. 28 asking them to provide details of LCs including the names of importing firms, exporters, number of LCs, quality of goods, amount and other details as per the request from RID.

Tankamani Sharma, director general at RID told the Post that his department is aiming at controlling possible misappropriation of foreign exchange, money laundering and effectively monitoring possible leakages of revenue.

He made it clear that RID would closely monitor the transaction of significant amounts from the LCs.

"There have been cases of misappropriation of LCs in the past in which billions of rupees have been paid out without importing any goods," he said. The Agriculture Input Company had failed to import 1250 metric tons of grain from Israel despite paying money as per the LC opened some three years back.

Likewise, it has also already sought information about the promoters of commercial banks, finance companies and development banks investing more than Rs. 5 million in those institutions. According to Sharma, about a dozen banks and financial institutions have already sent information about such promoters.

"We had to go after the banks' promoters and find out whether their income invested in the financial institutions was taxed income."

Not only RID, the Inland Revenue Department (IRD) has also sought the list of borrowers taking loans above Rs. 1 million.

According to Kapildev Ghimire, director general at IRD, as many as 20 banks and financial companies have already sent the details of borrowers taking loans above Rs. 1 million so far.

He also said that IRD would seek the required information from RID too in order to control tax evasions.

The bankers however are feeling unease at the government seeking information from the banks about their clients.

Ashok Shumsher Rana, chief executive officer of Himalayan Bank and Anil Gyawali, chief executive officer of Global Bank said they were compelled to provide all the information sought by NRB. "We, however, don't give any information to other agencies," they said.

CA Chair and President discuss statute-drafting progress

Kantipur Report

KATHMANDU, Feb 2 - Constituent Assembly (CA) Chairman Subash Chandra Nemwang called on President Dr Ram Baran Yadav on Monday.

The duo discussed the progress being made in the constitution-drafting process during the meeting held at President's office in Shital Niwas today.

CA Chairman informed the President about the government's plan to deploy 'civil suggestion collection' teams for drafting the new constitution.

The civil suggestion collection team will collect people's view from all the 75 districts by March 23.

President Yadav also expressed concerns over the disputes that surfaced after the government decided to promulgate ordinances.

In response, Chairman Nemwang explained the president about the ordinance row and the parliamentary procedures.

According to a source at Shital Niwas, the meeting was just a regular one.

Funds no problem if utilized properly: Donor agencies

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Representatives of donor agencies said that the government should ensure proper utilization of resources in order to receive expected foreign aid. Urging the government to take private sector into confidence in development, they assured that there would be no shortage of funds if the government can stop lack of transparency, corruption and lack of accountability.

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NRB: Remittance up despite global blues

Kantipur Report

KATHMANDU, Feb 3 - Despite a global recession, the inflow of remittances increased by 65.8 percent during the first five months of the current fiscal year, according to a report on the latest micro-economic situation of

the country released by Nepal Rastra Bank (NRB) on Monday.

The surge in remittances contributed to a surplus in the current account of Rs. 12.3 billion from a deficit of Rs. 7.5 billion during the same period last year. The growth of remittance flow was 17.6 percent last year.

However, recent moves by Malaysia and the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.) to discourage foreign workers might affect remittances in the future. Remittances account for 17.4 percent of Nepal's Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

The balance of payments also recorded a significant surplus of Rs. 22.8 billion during the first five months of the current fiscal year compared to a surplus of Rs. 31.1 million during the same period last year.

According to NRB, the country's exports also grew by 30.9 percent during the period against a decline of 4.4 percent during the same period last year. Exports to India grew by just 15.1 percent compared to a 64 percent rise in third country exports.

An increase in the export of readymade garments, shoes and sandals, tooth paste, G.I. pipes and noodles was primarily responsible for the increase in exports to India. A surge in the export of pulses, woollen carpets, pashmina, readymade garments and herbs accounted for the tremendous growth in third country exports.

Likewise, imports also grew by 32.6 percent this year against an increase of 8.2 percent last year. Imports from India were up by 17.1 percent compared to 57.2 percent for third country imports. Inflation rose to 14.1 percent this year against 5.7 percent last year, according to the central bank.

During the five-month period under review, the government budget showed a surplus of Rs. 2.2 billion against a deficit of Rs. 9.8 billion previously. An increase in revenue and foreign cash grants accounted for the budget surplus during the period.

Domestic credit was up 6.5 percent compared to a growth of 10.4 percent last year. NRB stated that low government expenditure contributed to the slowdown in the growth of domestic credit in the review period.

The growth of private sector credit also went down marginally during the first five months of the current fiscal year compared to the corresponding period last year. Credit to the private sector increased by 10.1 percent this year against 10.9 percent last year, according to NRB

Maoists, UML to promulgate ordinances after political consultations

Two major partners in the coalition government, Unified CPN (Maoist) andCPN (UML), have agreed to promulgate the ordinances only afterconsultation with parties, including the main opposition Nepali Congress.The meeting of the top leaders of the two parties held in Prime Minister'residence in Baluwatar Monday morning ... with a conclusion that the three ordinances in the pipeline would be discussed with other parties toensure their effective implementation.Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal will hold discussion with Congressleadership on the ordinances, Maoist spokesperson Dina Nath Sharma said.The parties also agreed, in principle, that any political appointmentsmust be discussed with

coalition partners to avoid differences.other coalition partners have been alleging the Maoists of makingpolitical appointments unilaterally.The leaders also discussed the transfers of government employees,formation of local bodies and army integration process, but there was noconcrete understanding on these issues. nepalnews.

Khanal asks Maoists to change or face dire consequences

General Secretary of the second largest coalition partner the Unified Marxist-Leninist (UML), Jhala Nath Khanal has warned the Maoists of dire consequences if they don't stop their feudal and fascist activities.

Addressing a gathering of party workers on Saturday in the party headquarter Balkhu, Khanal urged Maoists to change its character of resorting to killings and intimidations. "Change yourself. We say again, change yourself. Otherwise, UML will be forced to take serious measures," Khanal said. "Attacking and intimidating people cannot be a communist character. Instead it is a fascist and feudal character."

The gathering was organised in preparation of the party's general convention to be held in Butwal later this month.

General Secretary Khanal also urged his party workers to stay prepared to take a lead role in the national politics. "The UML will play a leadership role after formulating clear strategies in the upcoming convention," he said.

FNJ: Women journalists face psychological terror

Kantipur Report

NEPALGUNJ, Feb 3 - A fact-finding mission of Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) said that journalists in various western districts have been working under "psychological terror" due to threats issued by various armed groups and cadres of Unified CPN (Maoist) as well.

Making public its report on the condition of working journalists in Banke, Bardiya, Kailali and Kanchanpur here at Nepalgunj on Monday, the FNJ team said that there was no environment to file factual news due to such threats.

The report also shed lights on the feeling of insecurity and hopelessness among women journalists in the districts, especially after the murder of Janakpur-based journalist Uma Singh.

"If such situation continues, the number of woman journalists will surely decrease as they are preparing to quit their job," said Gauri Kathayat, a representative of the mission.

The FNJ mission also said that the Home Ministry sent no written directive to local security bodies in the districts for the security of journalists, as pledged by the government earlier.

"The adverse working environment in the districts will surely prompt in the switching of their careers by journalists if the government fails to come up with visionary plans," said Janak Nepal, another representative of the FNJ mission.

Maoists for establishing communism through socialism

United CPN (Maoist), whose top leaders have time and again repeated their commitments for multi-party democracy, has said its ultimatum mission is to establish a communist system in Nepal.A meeting of the Maoist parliamentary party held at Singh Durbar Monday passed its statute deciding to work for establishing ... ...through socialism. The statute has been revised after unification with CPN Unity Center (Masal). The statute outlines the dos and don'ts for the party leaders.It mentions that new constitution will be pro-people which the party believes will help attain communism in the long run.The Maoist ministers attending the meeting briefed the lawmakers regarding the achievements of their ministries and the future plans.As per the statute, parliamentary party leader and deputy leader can be removed through the vote of no-confidence. The party must call the parliamentary meeting within fifteen days if one fourth of the MPs make such a demand. nepalnews.

CA chair, prez discuss goings-on

At a time when major political parties are expressing their resentment against the government for promulgating ordinances, Constituent Assembly Chairman Subas Nembang on Monday conferred with President Dr. Ram Baran Yadav at the latter's office about the dispute as well as other pertinent political issues. Emerging from the meeting, Chairman Nembang said he discussed the current political situation along with the ongoing progress in constitution drafting process with the president and put forward his views. Meanwhile, constitutional experts have advised President Yadav to consult with Attorney General and leaders of various political parties prior to giving his nod to the recently promulgated ordinances. A delegation led by Tikaram Bhattarai, chairman of Constitutional Law Practitioners' Front, visited the President's Office and made such a request to Yadav. Immediately after the government on Jan. 28 promulgated three ordinances - Investment Board Ordinance-2065) Ordinance to Declare Special Economic Zones - 2065 and Public Service Ordinance -- both ruling CPN-UML and the main opposition party Nepali Congress had flayed the government decision saying that it is an anti- democratic act.

CA members to tour around the country to collect public opinion

Constituent Assembly (CA) members are set to tour around the country tocollect public opinion as part of writing the new constitution, CAhairman Subas Nemwang informed on Monday.Talking to reporters after a programme in the capital, Nemwang said thatmembers of all the CA committees would travel ... ...the districts from Tuesday and interact with ordinary citizens and representatives of varioussections of the society on how to draft an inclusive constitution.members, according to him, will visit all 75 districts.14 committees under the CA including the Constitutional Committee havestarted initial homework on the new constitution.Nemwang further said that people from different regions and ethniccommunities need to show unity to ensure that the statute-drafting process

Maoists, UML agree to end war of words

Unified CPN (Maoist) and CPN (UML) have agreed to end the 'war of words'during a top-level discussion held at Baluwatar on Sunday.While the two main ruling allies decided to stop bickering they agreed tohold further discussion to resolve differences over the proposedordinances, Nepal Army's recruitment .....and other contentious issues. Prime Minister and Maoist chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal, UML generalsecretary Jhala Nath Khanal, former UML general secretary Madhav KumarNepal and other senior leaders of the two parties were present at themeeting.Leaders ofthe two parties are engaged in a bitter exchange of words forsome time now.Maoist spokesperson Dina Nath Sharma said the top leaders would again meetMonday morning to reach a concrete agreement.The Maoist-UML agreement comes a day after the leaders of various leftparties called for 'functional solidarity' among the lefts in order towrite a progressive constitution.other communist parties had criticised the UML and the Maoists forengaging in a nasty debate despite being key allies in the government. nepalnews.

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Minister Mahara calls for 'new understanding' among parties

Minister for Information and Communication Krishna Bahadur Mahara Monday talked about a need for a "new understanding" among the political parties to take the ongoing peace process to a conclusion, but added that those in favour of status quo want to draw up a constitution similar to the now-defunct 1990 constitution.

Speaking at a programme in Tulsipur of Dang, Minister Mahara said few political parties are trying to duplicate the 1990 constitution while drafting the new constitution, and that because of this the Maoists are increasingly up in arms against the forces for status quo.

The Maoist minister, however, said that unity among the political parties should not break down until the new constitution is written.

On Sunday, Minister Mahara, who is also the government's spokesperson, lashed out at what he called as imperialists and expansionists for increasing the differences between the government and Nepal Army (NA).

At a programme in Ghorahiat in Dang, he said that imperialists were actively interfering in government functioning, policy making and economic activities and accused them of also fueling tensions between the government and the NA so as to create hurdles in the army integration process which is imperative for taking the peace process to its logical conclusion.

The Maoists view America as "imperialists" and neighboring India as "expansionists".

He further claimed the government could not work to fulfill people's expectation due to their interference, but said that Maoists will never bow down to them.

The same day senior Maoist leader and ideologue Mohan Baidya said in a programme in the capital city that "foreign reactionary forces" active in the region are conspiring to disintegrate Nepal.

Upon being pressed who were those "foreign reactionary forces", he quickly replied, "India is conspiring to disintegrate Nepal by strengthening Madhesi parties."

"We will fight against any force that tries to disintegrate the country," he added

Large tracts of Nepali land encroached by Indian side: Parliamentary team

The parliamentary team conducting field study on encroached land in various bordering areas of the eastern Nepal districts has concluded that large tracts of Nepali land have been encroached upon by India at various points.

A team of Foreign Relations and Human Rights Committee found that the Indian side has encroached Nepali land in Manebhanjyang, Guphapatal, Pulkhola, Phatak, Hile, Chhabise and Simala on various excuses.

The team led by committee chairman Padma Lal Bishwokarma began inspection of encroached land following media reports of land encroachment at various bordering areas of the eastern districts by the Indian side.

Saying that land being cultivated by Nepalis for years has now become part of Indian territory, the committee expressed grave concern over the matter.

“The recently prepared map of border areas cannot be regarded as reliable for demarcation between the two countries,” Bishwokarma told the Kathmandu Post, adding that the committee will submit report of the field study as soon as possible to find amicable solution of the problems.

The team members told the Post that security personnel of Seema Suraksha Bal (SSB), an Indian paramilitary force deployed along Nepal-India border, has set up its camp inside Nepali territory in Pulkhol of Pashupatinagar including Hile and Guphapatal.

Nepali becomes youngest Grand Master

Anish Giri has become the youngest Grand Master (GM) in a prestigious chess tournament organised at Wijk Aan Zee, Holland by beating GM Edurado Iturrizaga of Venezuela.Born to a Nepali father and a Russian mother in Holland, Anish completed his final norm on Saturday by beating GM Iturrizaga at the age of 14 years, 7 months and two days. It was a tough game wherein Anish turned the tide in mutual time scramble. Anish thus became the youngest Grandmaster in the world presently having completed the title requirements in the 11th round of the traditional tournament. Anish is also one of those players who earned a GM title without being awarded the title of an International Master.His virtual rating of 2528 has made him the 12th youngest grandmaster in history.

Export of Nepali manpower in crisis

The number of Nepali migrant workers leaving for various countries is witnessing a steep tumble after the government stopped issuing work permits for Malaysia. Of course, the pace of Nepali unskilled workers going abroad has also slowed down drastically as other countries are resorting to retrenchment due to the ongoing global financial meltdown.

According to data issued by Department of Foreign Employment (DoFE), the number of Nepali abroad job-seekers declined to 12,313 in the month of Poush. The number was 18,685 in Mangsir and it stood at 20,543 a month earlier in Kartik.

The government of United Arab Emirates has also recently decided to cut the number of foreign workers by a whopping 45 percent. This decision can safely be predicted to severely hit Nepali workers. There are hundreds of thousands of Nepali labourers working in the major cities of UAE.

It is said that UAE will begin the process of cutting jobs within a few days as the government has already ordered companies not to recruit new workers.

The Nepali Embassy there has reportedly asked the Government of Nepal to insulate Nepali workers from job cuts as it will trigger severe crisis for them.

Other Gulf countries, the most preferred destinations of a majority of Nepali foreign job-seekers- have also reduced the workforce strength especially unskilled workers.

Labour experts have warned that the growing retrenchment resorted to by these countries will wreck havoc with flow of remittance into the country. “The shaky economy of the country is being largely buoyed up by

the remittance sent by migrant Nepali workers. So, the government should raise the voices of Nepali laborers diplomatically," they prescribe.

Baidya claims India conspiring to divide Nepal

Senior Unified CPN (Maoist) leader Mohan Baidya 'Kiran' Sunday lashed outat India for conspiring to disintegrate Nepal by using Madhesh as aweapon, and added that the people will fight against it."National and international reactionaries are conspiring to disintegrateNepal," he said at a programme organised in the ... .and when asked who were those "foreign reactionaries", he quickly replied, "India isconspiring to disintegrate Nepal by strengthening Madhesi parties.Baidya, who is the organisation chief of the Maoist party and isconsidered a hawk inside the party as a hard-line ideologue, claimed thatit was the Maoists who had first raised the legitimate demands of Madhesh,but that few elements, on the direction of India, used the Madhesh issueinto its benefit and incited wrongdoings.activities by India has raised a question on the sovereignty andterritorial integrity of the country.He, however, said that Nepal won't disintegrate under any circumstance andthat those attempting to do that will be defeated as the party will actstrongly against them."The Nepali people will struggle against anybody who tries to disintegrateNepal," Baidya said, replying to a pointed question by a journalist if hisparty will be ready to take on India on the matter.He also accused India of encroaching Nepali territory and said that theparty will appear very strongly against it.In the same vein, he dismissed the demand for "One Madhesh as one state"as baseless and termed it as a policy to disintegrate the nation.informed that the Maoist party is planning to bring new strategy regardingMadhesh as it is very serious on the issue. nepalnews.

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"We will fight against any force that tries to disintegrate the country," he added.

Govt withdraws decision to establish 'administrative centres' in Terai

Rautahat, Sarlahi and Mahottarai.Issuing a statement Sunday, the Home Ministry said the decision toestablish IASCs in these districts has been put on hold in view of th. .protests against it. The ministry clarified that the plan was introduced with a view to provideeffective administrative services to the people, adding that thegovernment would take a decision on the matter after further study.Citizenship certificates and passports would be issued from such centresapart from other administrative services.offices located in the district headquarters would be shifted to otherplaces.Locals of Jaleshwor in Mahottari have been carrying out angry protests forthe last 18 days against the decision to establish IASCs.were reports of clashes between the agitators and the police in the town.Protests were organised also in Sarlahi district HQ Malangawa, Bara'sKalaiya and Gaur of Rautahat against the decision.While the locals of the four district headquarters organised protestsresidents of places where the IASCs would be established had cheered thegovernment decision. nepalnews.Govt decision to shift Jaleshwor-based govt offices draws flak

Maoists, UML to promulgate ordinances after political consultations

Two major partners in the coalition government, Unified CPN (Maoist) and CPN (UML), have agreed to promulgate the ordinances only after consultation with parties, including the main opposition Nepali Congress.

The meeting of the top leaders of the two parties held in Prime Minister's residence in Baluwatar Monday morning ended with a conclusion that the three ordinances in the pipeline would be discussed with other parties to ensure their effective implementation.

Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal will hold discussion with Congress leadership on the ordinances, Maoist spokesperson Dina Nath Sharma said.

The parties also agreed, in principle, that any political appointments must be discussed with coalition partners to avoid differences. UML and other coalition partners have been alleging the Maoists of making political appointments unilaterally.

The leaders also discussed the transfers of government employees, formation of local bodies and army integration process, but there was no concrete understanding on these issues

Martin meets PM; suggests early start of army integration process

Outgoing UNMIN Chief and Special Representative of the UNSecretary-General to Nepal, Ian Martin, has advised the government toimmediately push ahead the army integration process as per theComprehensive Peace Accord.In a farewell visit he made to Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal at thelatter's official residence ...Baluwatar on Sunday, Martin also stressed the need for consensus among the political parties to take the peaceprocess to its logical conclusion.During the meeting, Martin expressed concern at the ongoing dispute overNepal Army's recruitment plan and increasing differences among thepolitical parties, warning that the peace process may derail if the pastagreements reached between the parties are not implemented and armyintegration process doesn't move ahead as per the peace accord.In response, PM Dahal assured that the government will expedite the armyintegration process by remaining within the guidelines of the peace accordand the agreement with UNMIN as well as moving ahead with consensus.PM Dahal further informed that a special committee for army integrationhas also been formed in consensus with all political parties and that thecommittee will expedite the integration process," Hira Bahadur Thapa, PM'sforeign relations advisor, told media persons after the meeting.Newly appointed UNMIN chief Karin Landgren including other UNMIN officialswere also present in the meeting.Martin, who served as the UNSG's Special Representative to Nepal for twoyears, is leaving for UN headquarters in New York within a few day

Tourist arrivals tumble by 15.8 pc

Tourist arrivals in the country via air in the month of January 2009 have decreased by 15.8 percent to 21,944 in comparison to the same month last year, according to figures released by Immigration Office, Tribhuvan International Airport (TIA) on Monday.

However, the entire South Asian region has gained positive growth except for arrivals from India. Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan have registered growth by 6.6 percent, 13.3 percent and 29.9 percent respectively. But, India witnessed a negative growth of 17.6 percent in the current month.

Similarly, other Asian countries including China, Singapore and Thailand have maintained the upward trend with 48.8 percent, 30.3 percent and 29.8 percent of growth respectively. However, arrivals from Japan and South Korea have witnessed negative growth in the arrival figures by 20.7 percent, and 54.9 percent respectively.

The entire European markets except for Belgium (31.8 percent) and Denmark (27.8 percent) registered negative growth in comparison to the same month last year.

Private sector demands scrapping of VDIS

A delegation representing various private sector organizations submitted a memorandum to Finance Minister Dr Baburam Bhattarai on Monday demanding that the government nullify its Voluntary Declaration of Income Scheme (VDIS), the deadline of which will expire after 10 days.

Representatives of the Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FNCCI), Confederation of Nepalese Industries (CNI) and Nepal Chamber of Commerce (NCC) urged the finance

minister to withdraw the VDIS.

The have termed the program as something which is incongruent with the Income Tax Act. Moreover, the entrepreneurs have also asked the government to replace the program with another scheme which will be devised through proper consultation with the Revenue Consultation Committee.

The private sector is reluctant to pay tax under VDIS saying that the government has not been serious in addressing the problems of the sector and the scheme could discourage investment.

However, the government has been saying it is confident that it will meet its target of collecting Rs. 1 billion in revenue through the scheme by February 11. It has also warned that the action will be taken against those who refuse to pay tax within the stipulated period.

Revenue mobilization augments by 33.1pc

During the first five months of the current fiscal year, revenue mobilization grew by 33.1 percent to Rs 43.1 billion compared to an increase of 21 percent in the same period last year, according to a report on the latest micro-economic situation of the country released by Nepal Rastra Bank (NRB) on Monday.

The revenue growth is ascribed to high growth of income tax, VAT revenue, excise, vehicle tax and registration fee as well as high growth in non-tax revenue.

According to NRB, the country's exports also registered a growth of 30.9 percent during the period against a decline of 4.4 percent during the same period last year.

Overall balance of payment (BoP) saw a surplus of Rs 22.8 billion compared to a surplus of Rs 31.1 million the last fiscal year. Similarly, remittance grew by 65.8 percent in the first five months against a growth of 17.6 percent in the same period last year.

On the other hand, imports also soared by 32.6 percent this year against an increase of 8.2 percent last year. "During the first five months of this year, the government spending increased by 2.5 percent to Rs 48.5 billion compared to an increase of 44.3 percent in the same period last fiscal year," the report said.

However, the government was absolutely unable to control price rise which stood at 14.1 percent in mid-December 2008 from 5.7 percent in the same period last year

Ambassador raising donations for UML general convention

Nepalese living in Myanmar have complained that the Nepalese ambassador to Myanmar is raising donations from them for the up coming General Convention of the CPN (UML), Annapurna Post daily reported.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) has received complaints that Dr. Guna Laxmi Bishwokarma, who was appointed ambassador from UML's quota by the previous government, is collecting donations from Nepalese living in Myanmar and Thailand and from diplomatic agencies, according to the ministry sources.

Nepalese diaspora in Myanmar has requested MoFA to stop the ambassador's fund-raising activities verbally and through a letter written to the ministry.

"Myanmar government will repatriate us if they come to know that we are giving donations to the Nepalese ambassador. So, please ask the ambassador to stop such activity." They have stated in a letter to the MoFA.

During her visit to Kathmandu a few days ago, Ambassador Bishwokarma had informed the foreign ministry officials that she would be collecting donations in Myanmar for UML general convention. In reply, the officials had suggested her not to do so, as such activity from an ambassador would not look good in the diplomatic fraternity.

Finance Minister seeks donors' support; govt asked to maintain transparency

Finance Minister Dr. Baburam Bhattarai has urged donor agencies to extend enthusiastic support to materialise the Nepal government's efforts in economical restructuring of the country at the wake of recent political transformation.

In a meeting of the representatives of various donor agencies and countries organised at the Ministry of Finance on Monday, Dr. Bhattarai stressed the need to work in carefully for resolving the problems of the country at this post-conflict phase.

Representatives of donor agencies said that the government should ensure proper utilization of resources in order to receive expected foreign aid. Urging the government to take private sector into confidence in development, they assured that there would be no shortage of funds if the government can stop lack of transparency, corruption and lack of accountability.

"There should be a guarantee of proper utilisation of the aid," said Bella Bird, Head of Office of DFID Nepal urging an immediate audit of the Peace Fund.

The government expects to collect NRs. 47 billion (US $ 610 million) in foreign aid and NRs. 19 billion (US $ 246 million) in loan in order to meet the ambitious budget of this fiscal year.

Minister Bhattarai thanked the donor agencies for their support in reconstruction and rehabilitation programmes and hoped for their continued support.

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Maoists to campaign for 'One Madhes, many province'

The internal deliberations of the Maoist party on the issue of Madhes concluded, Friday, with the party deciding to launch public campaign in the region.

Speaking at the meeting, party chairman and Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda,' has expressed firm commitment to resolve Madhes problems. He termed the slogan of Madhesi parties "One Madhes, One Province" as being anti-Madhesi.

The Maoists have, instead, favoured the slogan of "One Madhes, Many Province."

The party will mobilise its entire force to campaign and strengthen its organisation in Madhes region.

"We have seen the Madhesi problem not in isolation but taking it as a national problem, which also has class dimensions," said Maoist spokesperson Dinanath Sharma.

The party's central secretariat meeting is expected to take concrete decisions regarding the party campaign

Industrial sector is facing crisis due to govt, says FNCCI

Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FNCCI), Saturday, said that the myopic and self-serving attitude on the part of the political parties has whacked the entire commercial sector of the country.

Speaking at the inauguration of the 13th anniversary of Sindhupalchowk Chamber of Commerce and Industry at Barabise, Kush Kumar Joshi, President, FMCCI, said, “The entire industrial sector is severely reeling under poor law and order as well as power crisis. And, the political parties are solely responsible for this.”

He also stated that if the problems being faced by entrepreneurs of the country are not resolved at the soonest, the country’ economy will face a disaster .

Joshi also criticised the government for its failure to implement the proposed 35-point program.

Power import from India gives relief to western Terai

The additional 20 MW electricity imported by Nepal Electricity Authority from India has given some relief to the people of western terai districts from Saturday.

NEA added the imported electricity to its national power grid on Friday night that cut the load shedding hours between Butwal and Mahendra Nagar areas down to 25 hours a week from 40.

The imported power has been added to national grid through Tanakpur Transmitting Station, which is purchased at the rate of Indian Rs 4.5 per unit.

India has agreed to supply 60 MW power to Nepal while signing the agreement during the Power Summit 2008 held in Kathmandu recently.

Maoists accuse UML of playing double role

Senior leaders of the Maoists have come down hard against their coalition partner Unified Marxist Leninist (UML).

At the meeting of the central secretariat of the Maoists, Sunday, Maoist leaders accused UML of acting like an opposition party.

"Some section of UML leadership is busy criticizing the government as if they are opposition. While the UML is a ruling party on the one hand, it is also playing the role of opposition on the other hand," said senior Maoist leader CP Gajurel.

According to him, the party has decided to discuss the matter with the UML leadership in the next meeting of the high-level political committee.

Meanwhile, Gajurel informed that the Maoists have decided to announce their unification with Unity Centre (Masal) on January 13.

The meeting of the Maoist central secretariat held at Prime Minister and party chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal's Baluwatar residence Sunday afternoon took this decision.

Gajurel informed that a meeting of the party's central committee slated for January 11 will discuss matters related to new structure of the central committee of the unified party. He said the party would also take initiations for inducting a dissident faction of CPN (Marxist Leninist) into it.

Gajurel added that the name of the party will be adjusted after the unification. "Although the name CPN (Maoist) will not change, we will add some prefix to imply the unity. For instance, we could say the united CPN (Maoist)," he said. ***nepalnews.com Jan 04 09***

Judicial Council names ten SC justices

The Judicial Council (JC) Monday recommended ten names to be appointed as Supreme Court justices.

A meeting of the JC chaired by Chief Justice Kedar Prasad Giri recommended eight names as ad hoc justices while two have been recommended as permanent justices.

Krishna Prasad Upadhyaya and Prem Sharma, both appellate court judges, have been named as permanent justices of the apex court while Rana Bahadur Bam, Mohan Prakash Sitaula, Girish Chandra Lal, Avadesh Kumar Yadav, Bipulendra Chakrabarti, Sushila Karki, Bharat Raj Upreti and Prakash Wosti have been named as ad hoc justices.

Bam, Sitaula, Yadav and Lal are appellate court judges and the remaining four nominees are senior advocates.

They will be appointed as SC justices by the President following a parliamentary hearing.

The JC, which is authorised to take decisions on appointment, transfer of judges and other matters of judicial administration, had not met for months owing to differences between a member Motikaji Sthapit and its ex-officio member Law Minister Dev Gurung. ***nepalnews.com Jan 05 09***

PADT challenges SC order

The Pashupati Area Development Trust (PADT) has moved the Supreme Court (SC) challenging its earlier interim order regarding the appointment of new priests in Pashupatinath temple.

The trust submitted a plea, Monday, urging the apex court to vacate its interim order calling it as unfair and unjust.

The SC had, on January 1, delivered an interim order asking PADT to maintain status quo and not allow new priests to perform Puja. However, the Trust has already been flouting the order.

On Monday, Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' had promised to respect the SC order.

Khanal to have 'tough words' with Maoists

Amid worsening relations between the two major coalition partners, the general secretary of the Unified Marxist Leninist (UML) Jhal Nath Khanal has said that he will have 'tough words' with the Maoists who are leading the coalition.

Irked by what it calls as Maoists' lack of consultations with the coalition partners, the UML has taken a strong exception towards the recent public address by Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda,' and the introduction of ordinances.

"They are working without consultations. Now we will have tough talks with them," said Khanal.

The relations between the two largest coalition partners have soured also over the issue of recruitment by Nepali Army (NA).

The senior UML leaders have publicly advised the Maoists to not let the government's relation with NA deteriorate.

Nepalese launch new Internet search engine

Two Nepalese Americans have founded a new search engine that integrates processes and provides information in a user-friendly interface and aims to attract users in a unique way.

Sagoon, (sagoon.com) based in Washington DC, has released the beta version of its new search engine for public testing.

The key idea behind the Sagoon technology – "Word Space Model" – is to promote semantic search over the regular lexical search to provide more meaningful information to users. This is done by analyzing the content of Web data and news documents to find out hidden similarities among them. The implementation of "semantic analysis" requires a series of algorithms and mathematical calculations.

Sagoon was founded by two IT professionals Mr. Govinda Giri and Mr. Shiba Dhakal with technology development done by Elixir Web Solutions, a New Delhi based interactive media and Technology Company.

Indian police increase vigilance along border to check condom smuggling

Even as smuggling of arms, narcotics and valuable commodities goes virtually unnoticed along the Indo-Nepal border, reports say that police in bordering Indian state of Uttar Pradesh have stepped up efforts to check smuggling of condoms from Nepal.

The move by the Indian police came following reports in Banke district that condoms freely distributed in Nepal is being smuggled across to bordering towns in India to be sold in the markets.

Few days ago, police in Rupadhiya, an Indian town that shares border with Banke district, had confiscated two suitcases full of condoms in a raid at the local railway station, reports said.

They found that the condoms were smuggled from Nepal.

Reports quoted Rupadhiya police as saying that smuggling of freely-distributed condoms from Nepal into India for the purpose of selling it in the Indian markets is a criminal offence and must be stopped.

They said that they have increased vigilance at the border-checkpoint to discourage such activities.

NC to stir against govt ordinances

Nepali Congress has said that the government decided to bring ordinances by not going through the parliamentary procedure and hence violated the rule of law.

An informal meeting of the party held at party president Girija Prasad Koirala s residence at Maharajgunj Friday morning also accused the government of bringing the ordinances to finish off the norms of parliamentary democracy and decided to rally against it both from the parliament and the streets, according to NC leader Prakash Sharan Mahat.

Mahat told Nepal FM radio that the government brought the ordinances using the back door "which clearly proves that it wants to function in an arbitrary manner".

The NC leader said that the government also didn t consult with the president before bringing the ordinances, adding that the party will ask the president to withdraw the move that clearly violates the rule of law.

Constitutional provisions have it that the ordinances brought by the government needs to be approved by the president.

Mahat said that party president Koirala would come up with an official view-point of the party regarding the decision of the Maoist-led government in a short while.

Mahara says govt will not withdraw ordinances

The government spokesperson and Minister for Information and Communication Krishna Bahadur Mahara has said that the government will not withdraw ordinances despite stiff opposition from even ruling coalition partners.

Talking to reporters, Friday, Minister Mahara said, "The ordinances were introduced because they are necessary. They won't be withdrawn."

A few days ago, the cabinet had introduced ordinances on forming Special Economic Zone (SEZ), investment board and disappearance commission – just days after the budget session of the legislative parliament was prorogued.

The move has drawn strong opposition from political parties including ruling partners like Unified Marxist Leninist (UML) and Madhesi Janadhikar Forum (MJF).

The main opposition Nepali Congress (NC) has accused the Maoists of trying to undermine the parliament by introducing ordinance.

PM confers with European envoys, says govt is ready to take parties into confidence

Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal has reiterated his commitment to work in cooperation with other political parties.

During a meeting with ambassadors of the European community Saturday morning at his Baluwatar residence, PM Dahal said current security, economic and political problems in the country can be resolved through consensus with other parties.

The European envoys are learnt to have advised the government to improve relations with political parties, especially those not in coalition government, for successfully concluding the peace process and accelerating constitution writing process.

The meeting came amid reports of some European envoys expressing concern over increasing dispute between the government and the Nepal Army and delay in constitution drafting process.

They said though the international community is ready to extend financial assistance to the Maoist-led government, increasing instability and political dispute has concerned them.

Major parties discuss ways to resolve current problems

Senior leaders of seven major political parties discussed ways to resolve the current problems including the load-shedding and bandhs (shutdown strikes) taking place around the country.

Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal floated a proposal at the start of the meeting held in Baluwatar, seeking to keep the nation free from all kinds of bandhs and strikes for at least the coming six months.

Dahal, who heads the Unified CPN (Maoist), also emphasised the need for political consensus in resolving the pressing problems facing the nation.

According to UML general secretary Jhala Nath Khanal, who was present at the meeting, the parties reached an understanding to form a taskforce that will suggest measures to stop bandhs.

Prime Minister Dahal called the meeting of the major parties a day after he cancelled his planned Europe tour in order to focus on the problems at home.

Leaders of the main opposition Nepali Congress and Terai Madhesh Loktantrik Party were also present at the meeting.

NC vice president Ram Chandra Poudel told reporters that his party was ready to support government actions that are undertaken within legal parameters

Unified CPN-Maoist forms 15-member secretariat

The first meeting of the central committee of the unified CPN-Maoist has formed 45-member politburo and 15-member secretariat.

The existing 35 member politburo was enlarged by inducting ten members from hitherto CPN-Unity Center Masal – which has unified with the CPN-Maoist a few days ago to form Unified CPN-Maoists.

Likewise, the existing 11-member secretariat of the Maoists has been enlarged by inducting Narayan Kaji Shrestha 'Prakash,' Giriraj Mani Pokharel, Amik Sherchan and Lilamani Pokharel as new members representing the hitherto CPN-Unity Center Masal.

"The meeting decided to give completion to the process of unification," said Prakash

EC asks govt to announce by-election date

The Election Commission (EC) has asked the government to announce the date for by-election for six Constituent Assembly (CA) seats that remain vacant.

EC commissioners called Deputy Prime Minister Bam Dev Gautam and chief secretary Bhoj Raj Ghimire at the EC office and advised them to announce the by-election date at the earliest. The EC officials also sought government assistance in updating the voter lists.

By-election is to be conducted in Rolpa- 2, Morang-5 and 7, Kaski-1, Kanchanpur-4 and Dhanusha-5 remain vacant. Of the five seats vacated by candidates elected from two constituencies, Maoist chairman and Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal vacated Rolpa-2, Madhesi Janadhikar Forum leaders Upendra Yadav and

Bijaya Kumar Gachchhadar vacated Morang-5 and 7 respectively, Nepali Congress leader Sher Bahadur Deuba Kanchanpur-4 and Maoist leader Dev Gurung gave up Kaski-1 while Dr Ram Baran Yadav gave up his Dhanusha-5 CA seat after being elected President.

Maoist political manifesto slams American imperialism and Indian expansionism

The Maoists have accused India and America of constantly intervening in Nepal's sovereignty and internal affairs, Kantipur Daily reported Saturday.

A recent Central Committee meeting of the CPN (Maoist) party, according to the daily, ended with the conclusion that the two countries have time and again intervened in Nepal's internal affairs and stressed on the need to "become serious towards safeguarding nationality".

The party has after forming the government under its leadership been saying that it will adopt a policy of "equidistance" in its relationship with India and China i.e. maintain cordial ties with both countries.

However, the Maoists have said that because of imperialistic policies of America and expansionist tendency of India they haven't changed their policy towards these two countries.

In its political manifesto the Maoists have claimed that America has repeatedly intervened in the country internal political affairs. It also states that India has intervened in Nepal's peace process right after the 12-point agreement between seven political parties in New Delhi. But the manifesto doesn't mention the nature of these interventions.

"The Americans have intervened in Nepal's political affairs and the (American) ambassador has been going around the country making speeches against the Maoists," the manifesto states.

Concluding that America has adopted the policy of "surrounding China through India", the party has stated that due to the country's strategic position it should maintain "equidistance" between India and China.

In an interview with Friday's edition of Nepali Times, Finance Minister and Maoist no.2 Dr Baburam Bhattarai said that instead of playing China and India against each other "we must take advantage of their proximity" and be a "vibrant bridge between the two fastest-growing economies".

"If Chinese delegates come to Nepal, India should not get agitated and when Indian delegates come to Nepal, China should also not be disturbed," adds Dr Bhattarai.

Nepal needs to balance its trade relation with China and India: Dr Bhattarai

Finance Minister Dr Baburam Bhattarai, Monday, said that Nepal should gear up to take advantage of vibrantly growing economies like China and India in order to expedite the country's socio-economic development.

During a round-table meeting organised by Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FNCCI) to attract more investment of China, he also said, "Nepal also needs to shift its trade focus towards China in order balance its economic relations with both India and China."

He also divulged that the government is carrying out homework to introduce an Act to ban strikes in industries soon.

Speaking on the same occasion, Chinese investors urged the government to provide hassle-free access to their goods to Nepali markets.

They also complained that Chinese goods are facing more custom related hurdles than Indian ones.

“Regular strikes, augmenting transportation fare and visa renewal problems are other major impediments that have contributed to inhibit the trade relation between Nepal and China,” they further stated.

According to data, Chinese investment in Nepal, in total, stands at Rs 3.74 billion. However, Chinese investors are now shying away from pouring their money into the country citing the investment-unfriendly climate

Defense minister wants NA to stop recruitments

Defense Minister Ram Bahadur Thapa warned of 'dire situation' if the Nepal Army did not immediately stop its ongoing recruitment process that invited debate among the parties.

Speaking during the meeting of Constituent Assembly Preservation of National Interest Committee on Tuesday, Thapa said the NA must remain with the strict command and control of the government because Nepal would never tolerate army rule.

He said the NA has received unwanted backing from outsiders regarding the government order to stop recruitment. "External forces are trying to play with the relation between army and the government," he said. He underlined the need for a new security policy for national sovereignty.

Speaking at the same meeting, defense secretary Baman Prasad Neupane said government has so far failed to formulate a strong security policy due to lack of manpower and expertise. He also admitted that Nepal's border security is poor.

OLPC faces fund crisis

The highly ambitious One Laptop Per Child (OPLC) programme announced by the Ministry of Education is facing crisis even before the start of the project thanks to the lack of funds.

The Ministry of Education and Sports had decided to distribute laptops to 1,500 children studying at second, fourth and sixth grades from 10 schools in Makawanpur and 15 schools in Mustang.

However, the Department of Education is not able to start the project due to the lack of Rs. 18 million (US $ 234,604) required for the purchase of the laptops. The laptops produced for the children cost US $188 each.

German delegation to visit Nepal

A delegation of the German Parliament is scheduled to visit Nepal from 4-7 February.

The four-member delegation will be headed by Dr Wolfgang Thierse, Vice-President (Deputy Speaker) of the German Parliament.

According to a press statement issued by the German embassy in Kathmandu, Dr. Thierse is scheduled to meet the President, the Prime Minster, the Chairman of the Constituent Assembly, as well as leaders of Nepal's political parties and religious groups in order to discuss issues related to peace, democracy, federalism and development of Nepal.

The delegation will also use this opportunity to get a first hand impression of German development cooperation in Nepal.

'Govt trying to intimidate army'

In what would further fuel the ongoing row between the Ministry of Defense and Nepal Army (NA), Nepali Congress (NC) Vice President Ram Chandra Poudel has said that the Maoist-led government is trying to intimidate the national army.

"Instead of being a guardian to the army, the government is only trying to intimidate them," Poudel said, clearly referring to Tuesday's statement of Defense Minister Ram Bahadur Thapa who had warned of dire consequences if the NA didn't obey government directive to stop fresh recruitment.

Poudel, who was speaking at a programme organised at Pashupati Multiple Campus in the capital Wednesday, said that the actions of the government clearly shows that the Maoists, which leads it, haven't changed their "rebel attitude".

The NC leader claimed that the former rebels still believe in arms and not democracy and because of this the weapons kept in the cantonments need to be submitted to the government.

Poudel also accused the Maoists of inching towards, as what he called,"neo-feudalism".

Nepal-India agree to establish four integrated checkpoints

Nepal and India have signed an agreement to set up four Integrated Check-Posts on both sides of the border so that bilateral trade and passenger traffic could be easier.

As per the agreement, the Integrated Check-Posts would be established in four major transit points between Nepal and India: Birgunj-Raxual, Biratnagar-Jogbani, Bhairahawa Sunauli and Nepalgunj-Rupaidiya.

The Indian Embassy in a statement said state-of-the-art infrastructure, facilitating integrated customs and immigration for smooth cross-border movement of people and goods would be established in these checkpoints.

"In response to the request of Government of Nepal, Government of India has agreed to provide full technical and financial assistance for the new infrastructure to be established on the Nepalese side," the embassy said. Detailed Project Report for the Integrated Check-Posts at these border points has been completed by the project consultants, M/s RITES Ltd. at a cost of Rs. 40 million provided by Government of India.

Two-thirds of the total trade between India and Nepal takes place through the Raxaul-Birgunj border point where the Integrated Check-Posts would be developed under Phase-I of the project, while the remaining three border points would be taken up under Phase-II.

A bilateral Project Steering Committee co-chaired by Secretary (Border Management) of Government of India, and Secretary (Physical Planning & Works), Government of Nepal has been set up for coordination of activities and speedy implementation of the project on the two sides.

The third meeting of the Project Steering Committee was held on Thursday (January 29) at Birgunj, during which both sides informed each other of the preparatory work already done and discussed the roadmap for fast-tracking future works for the Integrated Check Posts. The meeting also approved the Detailed Engineering Report prepared by RITES Ltd. for the Integrated Check-Posts at Raxaul and Birgunj.

The works on the Nepal side will cost approximately Rs. 2 billion and on the Indian side, approximately Rs. 1.92 billion.

Koirala opposes new ordinances; accuses govt of undermining parliamentary system

Former Prime Minister and president of the main opposition Nepali Congress, Girija Prasad Koirala, has expressed dissatisfaction over decision of the government to introduce new ordinances.

Talking to media persons after a function organised at NC party headquarters in Lalitpur Thursday on the occasion of the Martyrs Day, Koirala said the Maoist-led government has undermined the role parliamentary system by promulgating ordinance soon after closing of the House session.

On Wednesday, the government had promulgated three ordinances on formation of commission on disappearances, declaration of special economic zone and institution of the investment board.

Koirala said he did not pay attention to what Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal said in his address to the nation, and accused the Maoists of trying to end the parliamentary system.

Coincidently, on Wednesday, the Maoist parliamentary party meeting decided
to use the parliamentary politics to achieve objective of establishing communism in Nepal.

Ki-moon recommends Karin Landgren as UNMIN chief

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon told the Security Council that he wished to appoint Karin Landgren, Swedish national, as his Representative in Nepal to lead the UN Mission in Nepal (UNMIN).

When UNSC approves the Ki-moon's proposal, Landgren, 51, will replace Ian Martin. Landgren has been serving as Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General in Nepal and deputy head of UNMIN since September 2008.

In her new role as Ban's Representative, she will head a slightly downsized UNMIN, the UN center said. She brings with her many years of political, managerial and international law experience with the UN.

The tenure for Martin was until January 23, after which the government requested the UN to extend its deadline by another six months, in smaller size. Now the UNMIN will serve in Nepal until July 23.

The Security Council last week had clearly indicated to the government that the UN mission will no longer be extended. Initially, the mission was organised for one year to support Nepal's peace process and the Constituent Assembly election.

A professor at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs, Landgren has undertaken UN assignments in Eritrea, Singapore, Bosnia and Herzegovina, India, the Philippines and the Great Lakes region of Africa in various capacities.

Thapa asks NC to lead democratic alliance

Former prime minister and president of Rastriya Janashakti Party (RJP) Surya Bahadur Thapa has asked the main opposition Nepali Congress (NC) to lead the democratic alliance against what he calls as the totalitarian forces.

"When the Maoists have been admitting all the monarchists and Mandaleys of yesteryears and can still claim itself to be a revolutionary party, there is no reason why NC should fear in leading a democratic alliance," Thapa told reporters.

"Once such a democratic alliance is formed then the country's slide towards civil war can be stopped then and there," he said.

Thapa said such an alliance had become imperative to maintain political balance.

Meanwhile, Thapa accused the Maoists of trying to denigrate and undermine the national army. "They had in the past tried to defeat and destroy the Nepali Army (NA). Since they could not do that and came to power on different circumstances, they are still bent on destroying the national army," he alleged

MALDIVES:

IDP to stage protest over flat down payments

Islamic Democratic Party (IDP) has revealed that the party will stage a protest, calling on the government to waive the down payment levied on those who received the new flats from Hulhumale', on Saturday night.

A key member of the party speaking to Miadhu Daily last night informed that the protest has been planned as the government has failed to keep up to its manifesto pledge of providing housing at affordable rates. The protest is planned to be held at Artificial Beach.

"The incumbent government before assuming power has pledged that it will provide housing at affordable rates, living in those flats by paying such a huge down payment does not mean that housing is being provided at affordable rates, so we are calling on the government either to cut down the down payment or waive it off completely" said IDP key official.

Those who received flats from Hulhumale' claim that the down payment is too much and that the government should reduce it. The government has already indicated that it will do what ever it can to reduce the down payment and that it fully realizes that such a hefty down payment is too much of burden on the people.

Crime Awareness program for school children held

A Crime Awareness program aimed at school children commenced on Tuesday at Ameer Ahmed School. The program was officially inaugurated by the school's Deputy Principal Hassan Shakir Mohamed. Police officers, school staff and teachers, senior school children attended the inauguration ceremony.

Suprintendent Ahmed Muneer speaking at the ceremony highlighted that this was the first of its kind aimed at schoolchildren. He thanked that management of Ameer Ahmed School for being the first to respond to the program and thus becoming the first to host the program. He stated that the first priority of the police is to protect the public from crime by prevention.

In the speech given by Deputy Principal Hassan Shakir , thanked Maldives Police Service for holding this first program of the year in their school and also called upon the students take whatever they can from the program.

Girls from grades 8, 9 and 10 attended the program which was jointly organized by the Public Affairs Department, the Capital Police and the Family and Child Protection Unit of Maldives Police Service. In this program Sergeant Aminath Leena Ali, of the Family and Child Protection Unit, gave information regarding crime awareness.

President condoles death of former Indian President

President Mohamed Nasheed has sent a message of condolence to the President of India, Pratibha Devisingh Patil following the demise of former President Ramaswamy Venkataraman. Former Indian President Venkataraman passed away on Tuesday, after suffering from prolonged illness, at an Army Hospital in Delhi at the age of 98.

In his message President Nasheed conveyed his condolences to the government and people of India and members of Venkataraman's family. Nasheed said that former Indian President will be remembered for his distinguished service to India including his contribution to drafting the Indian

constitution and later leading India from 1987 to 1992. In his death, the region has lost a noble and distinguished politician, President said.

Born December 4, 1910, Venkataraman was India's eighth president, serving from 1987 to 1992. He also served as vice president for nearly four years. He was a member of the Indian National Congress party and was defense, finance and interior security minister in the 1980s.

Inspection of IMDC Multispecialty Hospital completed

The inspection of the multi specialty hospital to be opened in Hithadhoo of Addu atoll by International Medical and Diagnostic Center has been completed, according to Ministry of Health and Family.

According to the ministry the inspection was carried out by a team from the ministry as well as a team from Addu atoll Hithadhoo Regional Hospital. Ministry revealed that license to officially open the IMDC Multispecialty Hospital will soon be issued.

IMDC Multispecialty Hospital is a 35 bed hospital and will have 8 doctors 16 nurses and 2 lab technicians when the hospital starts operations. The services include lab services, surgery, eco cardiogram and treadmill services and scan services. Ministry also revealed that x ray services will commence within a week.

Bill on Tourism Act sent to Committee

People’s Majlis on Wednesday has accepted the bill proposed by the government to amend the Maldives Tourism Act and has passed to send the bill to an 8 member Majlis adhoc committee.

When the bill was put to vote, 15 members out of 31 in attendance voted in favor of accepting the bill. 15 members also voted against the bill. As a result of the deadlock the chair, Speaker of the Majlis Mohamed Shihab as per article 87 of the constitution took part in the vote. Shihab voted in favor of accepting the bill and consequently the bill was accepted to the Majlis. In addition, although the Majlis Standing Orders bans members from taking part in votes in which members may have a personal interest, several members owning resorts took part in the vote.

In the opportunity opened to propose committees to send the bill for further scrutiny 2 committees were proposed and supported. Even though Noonu MP and Leader of People’s Alliance (PA) proposed to send the bill to the Majlis standing committee on Economic Affairs, Majlis voted in favor of sending the bill to Majlis adhoc committee proposed by Laamu MP Moosa Manik and supported by President’s member Mohamed Riyaz. Majlis voted in favor of Moosa Manik’s committee by 16 members voting in favor out of 25 cast.

The committee approved by the Majlis comprises of Gnaviani member Mohamed Ibrahim Didi, President’s member Ahmed Haleem, Dhaalu Member ADK Ahmed Nashid, Ga member Abdulla Jabir, Faafu member Ahmed Hamza, Thaa member Hassan Afeef and Addu member Ahmed Aslam. The committee is basically of members representing the ruling collation and members of the Majlis who owns resorts.

At Majlis sitting Tourism Minister Dr. Sawaad has expressed that the objective of the bill is to secure additional funds to the state budget.

Dismissal due political ideals unconstitutional - Aneesa

Dismissal of government employees or transferring them to different department or exerting undue pressure because of their political ideals is a violation of the country's constitution, Dhievhi Rahyithunge Party (DRP) parliamentary group leader and Deputy Speaker of the People's Majlis Aneesa Ahmed has said.

Due to increasing public complaints over the matter, Miadhu Daily posed the question to Aneesa whether such action is permissible by the constitution in force. Aneesa replied that such complaints have on the rise since the new government assumed office, as many employees who have different political thinking are being either dismissed or transferred to other departments.

"The action is not specific to a particular department or ministry of the government, employees having DRP membership and people who have different political ideals from the ruling party are being pressurized, transferred or dismissed from their jobs, this is extremely sad" key opposition member Aneesa said.

She further said the right to equal employment is a basic right guaranteed by the constitution and any action which violates such right is directly against the constitution.

"A person's basic rights shall not be affected due his or her political ideals and any action which violates such rights is an action against the constitution" Aneesa said.

In addition to Aneesa, other key politicians also have expressed the same and have called on Civil Service Commission to look in to the matter. Leader of People's Association (PA) Abdulla Yamin also have expressed that civil servants cannot be either dismissed or transferred without the consent or knowledge of Civil Service Commission and that the matter should be closely investigated by the commission.

Civil Service Act and Regulations need to be updated – Dr. Waheed

Vice President Dr. Waheed has stated that the Civil Service Act and regulations need to be updated and added that work is already underway to address the matter.

Responding to a query by Miadhu Daily on how much consideration the government gives to the situation of security personnel who were the most affected by the recent systematic layoffs of civil service employees, and who are now forced to work in private companies that often fall behind in salary payments, Dr Waheed said that significant issues such as these have been identified by the government and attempted to give some reassurance by saying that work is already underway in making the necessary amendments to the civil service act and regulations.

He noted that broad discussions need to take place in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of such issues and to address them in an appropriate manner. He said that the present administration's policy is to reduce the size of government, and stated that there are some problems that arise due to privatization of certain government agencies and that the government will try to address such problems in the future.

Govt. makes senior appointments

President Mohamed Nasheed on Wednesday has appointed Naushad Waheed Hassan Maniku as the Counsellor (Cultural) at the High Commission of the Maldives in UK; Adnan Ali as the Advisor to the Minister at the Ministry of Housing, Transport and Environment and Hussain Adam as the Deputy Under Secretary at the President's Office.
President on Tuesday also appointed Akram Kamaaluddin as the Deputy Minister of Housing, Transport and Environment.

Govt. to allow more banks

The Maldives government has announced plans to open more banks, as part of its efforts to ease the current dollar shortage in the country.

The government has revealed that three overseas banks have already made the request for license to operate their branches in the country. The government also informed the Ministry of Finance and Treasury and Maldives Monetary Authority (MMA) is working on issuing the required licenses. The government has made it clear that it is top priority to speed up the process. Currently there is only one local bank, Bank of Maldives and several overseas banks, including Mauritius Bank, Bank of Ceylon, Habib Bank, State Bank of India and HSBC, operating in the country.

Government employees asked to be more responsible

Vice President Dr. Waheed has requested government employees to be more responsible and to provide the best possible service to the citizens. As the greater portion of government revenue is spent on staff salaries, government employees are obliged to render the most faithful service to the citizens who provide the government with the revenue.

Speaking at a press conference held at the President's Office, Dr. Waheed advised the senior management and employees to make a great effort to work together and to concentrate on working during official hours instead of working overtime.

Dr Waheed said that employees should work overtime only when dealing with urgent matters or in emergencies and that this is the practice in other parts of the world as well. He added that putting in unnecessary overtime would not be beneficial to either the employer or the employee.

Dr. Waheed mentioned that while the changes to the civil service salary framework might have a negative effect on the income of some employees who earn considerable amounts by working overtime, the inclusion of allowances and the new salaries will comparatively increase the income of every civil servant.

When asked by Miadhu Daily of the government's view regarding the concerns raised by some employees who contend that they would face grave difficulties in cooking for and feeding their children within the one-hour break period, the Vice President stated that he understands that there will be such difficulties and implored the employees to make the best use of their time.

US dollar value reaches Rf 14 mark

Due to difficulties in obtaining from United States dollar from local banks operating in the country most business companies are buying US dollars from the black market at values exceeding Rf. 14, according to information received.

Top businessman in the country speaking to Miadhu Daily on the matter expressed that he requires sums anywhere between US $ 30,000 to US $ 50,000 daily and that at present he is only able to get somewhere between US $ 3000 to US $ 5000 from local banks. He said in order to manage his business he is forced to purchase dollars from black market at elevated prices.

The top businessman also pointed out that if he were to stop importing goods due to difficulties in getting foreign currency, then it will be the general public who stands to suffer most. He said

prices in the market will soar if there is a short supply and the only way to solve that will be to buy US dollar at what ever value, even from the black market, and bring in the goods required by the people. He said prices will undoubtedly be affected when the dollar value rises.

Government employees are also expressing dissatisfaction and concern over possible increase in market prices due to rising dollar values, at a time when wages of government employees are expected to increase. They fear this increase will not bring any additional benefits.

Many believe that the current dollar shortage experienced in the country is due to government policy and government action.

President commence visit to Kolhumadulu atoll

President Mohamed Nasheed on Wednesday has commenced an official tour of Kolhumadulu atoll. As the first leg of his tour President stopped at Vilufushi of the atoll.

In Vilufushi the President inspected the rebuilding efforts of the island carried out by the British Red Cross. The members of the British Red Cross also gave a presentation to the President on their work in the island. The President also inspected the houses, mosque, power house and school that were being built in the island.

President Nasheed on Wednesday afternoon visited Buruni and met with the people of Buruni and the people of Vilufushi living in Buruni.

President Nasheed thanked the people of Buruni for the support and co-operation they had rendered the people of Vilufushi, who have been living in Buruni after the 2004 tsunami. He also said that hopefully, the people of Vilufushi will be able to return to their homes in Vilufushi in April or by May this year.

President Nasheed also assured the people of Buruni that the government would continue the development of the island even after the people of Vilufushi return to their homes. He stressed that government policies would be aimed at meeting the needs of the people.

In his speech, President said that government would upgrade Buruni health post to a health centre this year. He also noted that government recognized the agricultural potential of Buruni and would start agricultural projects in the island this February. He further said that the government would provide housing, on installment basis, for the people of Buruni.

President Nasheed also visited the island of Kin'bidhoo on Wednesday evening.

In Kin'bidhoo, President Nasheed inquired about the well-being of the people and the developmental needs for the island.
President visited Kin'bidhoo Health Centre and Kin'bidhoo School. During his visit to the school, he met with the teachers and talked on the importance of introducing grades 11 and 12 in the School. He also signed the visitors' book.

President Nasheed further inspected the Island Power House. He also observed the progress of construction of a Quran class being built by the Kin'bidhoo youth association, "Zuvaanunge Gulhun".

Govt. seeking convenient ways for employees - VP

Vice President Dr Mohamed Waheed has said that the government was now seeking more convenient ways for employees. Vice President made this statement while speaking at a press conference held to give details on the changes to the official working hours of the government. The press conference was held today at the President's Office.

Speaking at the press conference, Dr. Waheed highlighted the benefits that the change in working hours would bring. In this regard, he stressed that since most government offices provided direct services to the people, the offices should make the changes in a manner convenient for the public. Furthermore, Vice President said that the new changes would extend the service hours of offices.

Noting that the global economic crisis would also have an impact on the economy of the country, Dr Waheed emphasized the importance of employees to strive harder to improve the country's economic situation. He also focused on the need to improve work ethics and said that country would prosper with the hard work of its work force.

Dr Waheed also urged all government employees to work more efficiently, make productive use of the official working hours and to promote team spirit within the work place. At the press conference Vice President also took questions from the media.

Meanwhile government on Wednesday has declared, in a directive, its new working hours to be from 8am to 4pm, which will come into effect on 1 February 2009. The directive further states: a / that there will be a lunch time break of one hour from 12 pm to 1pm; b/there must not be a disruption to the government services during the lunch time break; c /employees who will not be able to take break between 12 pm and 1 pm will be able to do so from 1 pm to 2 pm; d/employees working on shift duties will work according to their duty roster; e/ effective from 1 February, political appointees should report to work before 8.30am and f/official working hours of the government during Ramadan would be from 9am to 1.30pm.

Billion dollar construction industry open to investors - Janah

President of Maldives Association of Construction Industry (MACI) Mohammad Ali Janah has said the country's billion dollar industry is open to Sri Lankan investors who participate in the Maldives

Construction Fair (MCF) to be held in Male in April this year, Sri Lanka's The Island Online reports.

Speaking at the launching ceremony of the Maldives Construction Fair 2009 at the Taj Samudra Hotel in Sri Lanka on Wednesday, Janah said Maldives imports almost everything and with the new government's policy of large scale privatization, there are endless opportunities for the bold and enterprising.

"A one billion US dollar construction industry awaits investors who are willing to take the plunge in an environment of global recession and reap the benefits of cheaper prices. The construction of 10,000 housing units and 64 tourist resorts are in the pipeline.

The investment in new resorts has been estimated around US$ 40 million. This of course, is in addition to the existing resorts numbering around 150, which also require various supplies. I like to see intense competition, so that the end product would not only be good, but also reasonably priced" Janah said.

Janah also talked about the government's plans to reduce the number of inhabited islands so as to develop better infrastructure facilities. Many state ventures including the Male International Airport are also up for privatization. So these are some of the many areas which Sri Lankan constructors and suppliers could exploit, Jannah said. He also new talked about the new government's plan to develop 7 regional centers.

The fourth Maldives Construction Fair will be held at Dharubaaruge from April 20 to 22, 2009. Organized by the Maldives Exhibition and Conference Services Private Limited, in association with MACI, this year's Fair will showcase the latest products and services in the market. Over 4000 trade and business visitors are expected to participate, surpassing the 2008 figure of 3127.

They would include building and construction industry personnel, agents, distributors, contractors, state and private sector manufacturers, engineers, architects, interior designers and the general public.

President concludes visit to Kolhumadulu atoll

President Mohamed Nasheed has returned to Male' after concluding visit to Kolhumadulu atoll on Thursday evening. In his tour to Kolhumadulu, the President visited ten islands of the atoll.

The first stop of the tour was at Vilufushi. After Vilifushi, the President visited Burunee, Kin'bidhoo and Veymandoo. The President on Thursday visited Hirilandhoo, Thimarafushi, Gaadhiffushi, Madifushi, Guraidhoo and Dhiyamigili.

During the visits to the islands, President Nasheed met with the people of the islands and briefed the people on the benefits of decentralization of administration of atolls. He also assured the people on government's commitment to provide basic services to the people.

Resort rental fees not President's property - Yamin

The rental charges of islands leased by the government for the purposes of developing the tourism in the country and other rental charges levied by the to government is not the property of the President but are funds accrued as government income, Noonu atoll MP and Leader of People's Alliance Abdulla Yamin has said.

He made the statement to Miadhu Daily when asked whether it will affect the state budget if the government waives one year of the rental fees of the resort islands leased to various businessmen and whether the President has the authority to do so.

Abdulla Yamin, brother of the former President Gayoom, replied that the state budget which included the government income and expenditure and that the budget states that the government will receive Rf. 1.5 billion as rental fees from various tourists resort islands leased out. He also criticized President Nasheed for waiving some Rf600 million at a time when the state budget is expected to face severe shortfalls.

“The state budget was passed by the Majlis taking in to account the government expenditure and revenue; it states that the government will receive Rf. 1.5 billion as rental fees from various tourists resorts, now recently President Nasheed waived amounts close to Rf.600 million at a time when the government is looking for ways to generate money to run its affairs and fulfill its pledges to the people; this is not the way it should be “Yamin said.

He further said such action raises serious doubts on the government’s sincerity. He said if the government is sincere, it would not waive off money that is coming to the people. In addition, Yamin the importance of Majlis endorsing the budget is also now questionable and that once passed any deviations will require permission from the Majlis.

“Its very clearly said in the constitution that once the budget is passed any deviations will require the specific authority of the Majlis, but the President has just waived off income from tourism industry, this is government revenue going to the state budget, not the president’s property to do whatever he wants,” Yamin expressed.

He further expressed that the new government, which has been in power for less than three months, is acting very irresponsibly. He said the President on his recent tour of the Kolhumadulu atoll has made promises worth more than Rf. 2 billion or so budgeted for the atolls. He criticized President’s promises of providing housing, water and sewerage for small islands with sparse population like Burunee. Yamin further said that all this was aimed at exerting influence on the forthcoming parliamentary elections.

Police concludes traffic awareness program

Maldives Police Services has concluded the traffic awareness program held for the drivers of State Trading Organization (STO) and certificates handed over at a special ceremony held on Tuesday at STO Vehicle Garage.

STO Assistant Director Mohamed Abdul Sattar was the Chief Guest of the ceremony. In his speech given at the ceremony Abdul Sattar said that the program had been a success and thanked the Maldives Police Service for organizing the program. He also expressed hope that the participant will use the education they received from the program effectively and expressed confidence that the participants will abide traffic rules and regulations.

The Superintendent of Police, Mohamed Rishwan also addressed the participants. In his address he said making the roads safer is one of the main aims of the police, and that this will be made easier with the cooperation of the public.

The certificates were awarded to the participants by Mohamed Abdu Sattar and Superintendant Mohamed Rishwan. The course was facilitated by experienced traffic police officers of the Maldives Police Service.

My PC showroom opened

A new show room called My PC which deals with Asus brand computers and laptops has been opened in Male' on Monday.

The show room, MY PC was officially opened by Civil Aviation and Communications Minister Dr. Mohamed Jameel Ahmed. My PC in an IT based show room dealing with Asus PC's, lap tops and accessories.

My PC has also launched a special promotion on Asus EPC lap tops and offers warranty up to 2 years, according to MY PC official. The promotion will continue till 16 February.

Incumbent govt defends & protects criminals - IDP

The incumbent government is a government which defend and protect criminals and that President Mohamed Nasheed's administration will not be able to establish a safe and secure environment, Islamic Democratic Party (IDP) leader Umar Naseer has said.

When posed the question by Miadhu Daily whether the increasing crime rate in the country, especially drug, theft and mugging, is due to irresponsibility certain government institutions, Umar replied that the number of offenders is rising because of the government's inadequate policies. He said offenders are being encouraged as a result of their policies.

"The number of offenders are on the rise, they are causing great difficulties for the public, the present government, immediately after coming in to power, has released many criminals to Male' arrest, this has caused the crimes to increase, further increasing the difficulties for the public; what we are seeing here is failure of institutions charged with arresting and handing out punishment to those who commit crimes" Umar said.

According to Umar, in his efforts to provide housing at affordable levels to the people, President Nasheed has succeeded in bringing the country within reach of the criminals. He further reiterated that President Nasheed's administration will never be able to establish a safe and secure environment.

"This is a government which is there to protect and defend criminals, it will never be able to establish a safe environment for the people" IDP Leader Umar said.

Dornier aircraft makes emergency landing

A Dornier aircraft operated by Maldivian, the airline division of the Island Aviation Services, has landed at Male' International Airport under emergency conditions.

The Dornier aircraft was travelling departed Male' to Hanimaadhoo , when the aircraft had to turn back due to malfunction of its main landing gears. According to the airline Director Human Resources and Administration Ismail Shujau the main landing gear malfunctioned and failed to retract. He reported that there were no casualties as a result of the incident.

"There is a such a thing known as main landing gear, this has to be retracted after the aircraft is airborne, supposedly the main landing gear failed to retract and that pilot saw it unfit to fly in that condition ; as such he decided to turn back the aircraft and land in emergency" Shujau explained.

Director Shujau revealed that aircraft had to fly for some time, in order to burn some fuel, before it landed.

“The aircraft had to burn off some fuel before it can land, because the aircraft has to be below a certain weight before it can land safely, when it landed the airport was under emergency condition” Shujau said.
He further revealed all rectification work is currently underway by the airlines experienced engineers.

IAS commenced operations when former national airline, Air Maldives, declared bankruptcy in 2000. The airline went regional in January 2008. IAS currently operates 14 weekly flights to Trivandrum.

Govt to commence monthly allowance to elderly from Sunday - Zaki

Special Envoy to the President Ibrahim Hussain Zaki has announced that the government will commence granting a monthly sum of Rf.2000 to all citizens above 65 years of age.

Speaking at a press conference held at the President’s office on Thursday, Zaki said some 18,000 to 19,000 applications have been received and that the government would commence giving away the monthly sums effective next Sunday to all those who have qualified through the banking services of the Maldives Postal Services.

Zaki revealed that this was not a pension provided by the government but a special allowance to everyone above 65 years. He noted that elderly needs to live with respect and dignity. He also said those who are getting pensions and those who qualify for pensions will also receive them.

Briefing the media on the readiness of the banking services of Maldives Posts, Ahmed Shihab said the company was now fully prepared and ready and once the lists and funds are received the project will commence as planned. He revealed that in Male’ the project will be coordinated from Dharubaaruge and in atolls through the company’s post offices in capital islands or thorough designated postal agents.

Speaking at the news conference Health and Family minister Dr. Aiminath Jameel expressed that as this a completely new undertaking embarked on by the government initial difficulties are to be expected.

President continues tour of Kolhumadulu atoll

President Mohamed Nasheed, as part of his tour of Kolhumadulu visited Veymandoo on Wednesday evening. Speaking to the people of the island President revealed that the utility companies established to provide basic services to the people would begin operation in mid this year. He said that with the commencement of operation of the utility companies, basic services including electricity, fresh water and sewerage systems and cooking gas would be delivered in a more convenient manner.

Furthermore, he said the government policy was to provide electricity to the people from a state owned company and to take a market based approach in developing state owned companies. President while in Veymandoo met with delegations from Vandhoo, Kan’doodhoo and Omadhoo.

President Nasheed on the second day of his tour of Kolhumadulhu atoll visited the islands of Hirilandhoo, Thimarafushi, Gaadhiffushi, Madifushi, Guraidhoo and Dhiyamigili.

Addressing the people of Hirilandhoo, President said the government was committed to increase its income and reduce expenditure. He expressed that the objective of this visit was to inform the people on the benefits of government policies and shared with the people details of the developmental projects planned for Hirilandhoo. He noted that the repair of the island jetty would begin within the next two to three months. He also said that construction of 30 flats would commence this year in Hirilandhoo, under the project to provide housing on installment basis. President further said that the government has undertaken regionalization process where the administration of atoll would eventually be decentralized. In this regard, he said that the atolls have now been divided in to seven provinces and he would appoint a State Minister to the South Central Province in the coming week.

President Nasheed speaking to the people of Thimarafushi stressed that his administration would deliver its electoral pledges, He said that the government was committed to overcome all obstacles towards development and treat everyone in a fair and equal manner. The President said that the work of the airport to be built in Thimarafushi would begin in the next three months. In addition, he said that the government planned to construct 125 flats in Thimarafushi which will be given in an installment basis. President also said that the developmental endeavors undertaken by the government were for the benefit of all citizens.

President speaking at Gaadhiffushi expressed that that the government would present a fishing vessel to the island to develop fishing in the island. He said that the vessel would be presented to the people within the next two weeks. He also assured that 25 houses would be built in for the people of the island, as a part of government's housing policy. He also shared with the people, the government's plan to introduce grade 8 in the island. He also visited and observed the work of the Gaadhiffusi Island Office and signed the visitors' book. He also visited the Island Court.

In Madifuhi President announced that the reconstruction work of the homes affected by the tsunami, which have not yet been completed, would soon begin. He also said that under the government's housing program, construction work of fifty houses in Madifushi would begin in the next 3 months. He further said that the government planned to present a fishing vessel to the people of Madifushi and called on the people to work together to get full benefit from the vessel. He assured the people that the government would resolve the problem of shortage of teachers in the island.
Speaking to the people of Guraidhoo President said that the aim of government's public services was to provide a better quality of life for the people. He noted the important contributions of the people of Guraidhoo to the fisheries industry and urged them to continue in this endeavor. He informed that the construction of 50 houses would begin in the island this year. The houses are planned to be offered on installment basis. He added that the major part of the construction work of Guraidhoo fish market has now been completed and that the government would give financial aid to complete this work. Furthermore, he said that postal banking services would also be introduced in Guraidhoo.

President Nasheed speaking in Dhiyamigili said that the government planned to promote and strengthen the field of arts education in the island of Dhiyamigili. The President made this statement during his meeting with the people of Dhiyamigili, as part of his tour to Kolhumadulu. Noting the historical significance of Dhiyamigili, the President said that he has now directed the National Centre for Historical and Linguistic Research to restore and preserve the Dhiyamigili Palace. He stressed that the purpose of this was to showcase our proud history to the whole world. He also revealed that the government planned to construct 50 houses in Dhiyamigili which will be given on an installment basis. He added that the construction of these 50 houses would begin in mid this year.

Govt. gives sets deadline for illegal expats to leave country

The government has given till April to all expatriates living illegally to leave the country or return to their native countries.

A statement issued by Department of Immigration and Emigration expressed that illegal expatriates wishing to leave the country voluntarily within the given period, will be provided with means to return their native country , once they arrive at the Department along with their passports.

Department said illegal expatriates staying on in the country beyond 1 April will be prosecuted under the law. The Department further said employers of such illegal expatriates will also be prosecuted.

Department said the umber of illegal expatriate workers are on the rise and the considerable amount of work is being done by concerned authorities to apprehend them. The department also revealed that regulations dealing with expatriate workers are being revised in an effort to better monitor and control the umber of illegal foreigners working in the country.

Some 80,000 foreigners are working in the country and more than 20,000 are working illegally, according to concerned authorities.

Govt to commence monthly allowance to elderly from Sunday - Zaki

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Speaking at the news conference Health and Family minister Dr. Aiminath Jameel expressed that as this a completely new undertaking embarked on by the government initial difficulties are to be expected.

Fiber dhoni destroyed in fire

A Fiber dhoni inside the compound of a house in Maradhoo of Seenu atoll has been badly damaged in a fire incident which occurred on early Friday morning.

According to Police they were informed of the incident approximately 0430 Friday morning and that a team was immediately dispatched to the site to contain the fire. Police further said they were able to control and extinguish the fire within an hour.

In controlling the fire, the civil firemen of the atoll and large number of the public provided assistance. The incident is currently being investigated by Serious and Organized Crime Unit of Maldives Police Services and Addu Atoll Police Station.

Dhiraagu cables catch fire

Cable reels at site of Dhiraagu caught fire yesterday. Cables and air conditioning units were damaged in the fire at the site located near the Villingili ferry terminal, according to Mohammed Mirshan, manager of marketing, communication and public relations at Dhiraagu.

“We cannot say what caused the fire” he said. “The fire damaged cables and other equipment at the site.”

A police official said that the fire broke out around 11 am yesterday, but was unable to reveal the cause at this time. Three rolls of cable and some air-conditioning units were damaged.

“Some boxes that contained AC units were damaged, apart from the cables. We suspect the AC units might have incurred some damage as well,” he said. “We are now investigating the matter.”

An eyewitness mentioned men entering the site, and believes that the fire was caused by un-extinguished cigarettes.

Man found in contempt of court given 2 months in Jail

A man who was summoned to the criminal court on charge of theft has been sentenced to two months imprisonment after being found in contempt of court. The sentence was pronounced on Jinan Abdul Kareem, 21, of Malé Municipality Registry.

He was taken into police custody after stealing a pair of jeans from the popular “Items” shop and was brought to court in order to extend the period of custody. Jinan became confrontational once the judge ruled to extend the custodial period; therefore, the judge held him in contempt of court and handed him a two month prison sentence.

Under the new constitution, judges are provided with the right to pass immediate judgment on persons who violate the sanctity of the court.

I am directly involved in parliamentary election – Nasheed

President Mohamed Nasheed has said that he will be directly involved in the upcoming elections amid accusations by opposing political parties that President Nasheed was exerting indirect influence over the parliamentary elections. At Friday night’s general assembly of the Maldivian Democratic Party, Nasheed spoke of even greater involvement in the elections once MDP candidates have been determined.

“Some political parties have accused me of being indirectly involved in the elections. This is a big misconception for I am directly involved” said Nasheed. “This is a completely different system. I

didn't assume the office of President as an independent candidate. That was the way under the old constitution. We are now following a new constitution. The form and the spirit of this constitution are very clear. This constitution supports a multi-party presidential system" the President said.

Nasheed expressed confidence in his party's candidates' chances of victory in the elections. Considering each candidate has to win about 800 or 900 votes, MDP candidates are the most capable and popular in their respective constituencies. The candidates represent the best hope of the most populous island within the constituency. Therefore, the President said there is no reason MDP cannot win 50 seats in the parliament.

"I don't see any way we can lose this election," he declared. "I am certain we will win the 50 seats, with ease, god willing. I would say studying sorcery in Salafiyya is not going to help them. We knew then that spending some time in the dusts of Gahira will not teach them anything about the country or its people. I am telling you repeatedly that I am directly involved in this election," Nasheed concluded.

MNDF and Australian Navy conduct joint exercise

Australian Navy and Maldives National Defense Force (MNDF) Coastguard has conducted a joint marine exercise in Maldives, according MNDF.

The exercise was held 6 miles off the coast of Hulhule was carried out on Thursday, 29 of January. The exercise was participated by the Australian Navy ship H.M.A.S Paramatta and the MNDF coastguards "ship Huravy" and "Ship Shaheed Ali".

OOW, Maneuvers, Hello Winching, Flag Hoisting, Damage control and Fire controlling exercises had been carried out. According to MNDF the objective of the joint exercise was to enhance the relation between the two countries and develop essential skills in conducting marine operations.

Election Commission provide state funding to political parties

Elections Commission has handed over the funds from the state budget to all registered political parties, as called for in the Political Party Regulations, despite its intention to stop providing funding to political parties operating without minimum membership of 3000. In this regard, Elections Commission has provided state funding to some 12 parties duly registered and operating in the country.

According to Assistant Director General of the Elections Commission Mohamed Tholal, the funds were issued following advice from Commission's sub committee on legal matters, the committee had said that providing the funding will not be an issue, we had provided funding the already existing regulations, as such state funding had been provided to 12 political parties, which means that there is currently no party without state funding" Tholal said.

Currently there are a total of 13 political parties on the political parties register maintained by the elections commission. No funding had been provided to the most recently registered Dhivehi Gaumee Party (DGP) as the Political Party Regulations sets a minimum period of operation to be eligible for state funding.

Out of the 12 parties which received state funding some 4 parties do not have the minimum membership of 3000 required for its registration. The parties are Social Liberal Party (SLP) Poverty Alleviating Party (PAP), People's Party (PP) and Maldivian National Congress (MNC).

The highest amount of money was given to Dhivehi Rahyithunge Party (DRP). The party received some Rf.3.3 million. DRP has a membership of 30,815. Second is the ruling Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) which received Rf.2.25 million. MDP has a membership of 19,392. In third place is Jumhoory Party (JP) which received Rf.1.21 million. JP has a membership of 8,134 members. Islamic Democratic Party (IDP) is in fourth place and received Rf.1.06 million as it has a membership of 6,481. Adhaalath Party, the party of the religious scholars, received Rf.1.02 million; Maldives Social Democratic Party (MSDP) received Rf.794, 895 while People's Alliance (PA) received Rf.765, 166.

Out of the parties which do not have membership of 3000, People's Party received the highest. Based on the current membership of 2,790 the party received Rf.717, 582 members. Maldivian National Congress (MNC) and Poverty Alleviating Party (PAP) based on their current memberships of 2,639 received some Rf.703, 684 each. Social Liberal Party (SLP) based on their current membership of 1,149 received Rf.566, 545.04.

Maldives Posts to start distribution of allowance on 2 Feb

Maldives Posts has revealed that the company will commence distributing the special allowance provided by the government to citizens above 65 years of age via the company's banking services on 2 February 2009.

Maldives Posts revealed the special allowance for the people above 65 years will distributed as per lists provided by the National Social Protection Agency and will be received from their own native island.

Maldives Posts further said on Monday, 2 February, the company will issue allowance for citizens of Seenu atoll, Fuvahmulah, Hulhumale' and Male'. Citizens above 65 years living in other parts of the country will be special allowance on 4 February.

For those living in Villingili of Kaafu atoll the special allowance will be issued from Dharubaaruge. In islands with braches of the company, the allowance will be issued from the branch office of the company and for those living in islands without a branch office of Maldives Posts monies will be issued from the island administrative office.

All monies will be handed over directly to the person concerned upon submission of their national ID cards, Maldives Posts revealed.

CII delegation arrives Maldives

A fourteen member delegation from the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) has arrived in the Maldives on Saturday on a special invitation of President Mohamed Nasheed.

The delegation is led by Kuldip Sahdev, former ambassador of India and Tarun Das, Chief Mentor at CII. According to Das the visit was to forge a new era of cooperation between CII and the Maldives. He lauded the recent visit by the President Nasheed as a tremendous success, and praised the process of democratic reform and the successful holding of the country's first multi-party elections. He further affirmed that CII was seeking to establish a long-term partnership with the Maldives, expressing the keenness of CII to support the development of the country in anyway possible, by establishing closer relations with the Maldives Chamber of Commerce and the local business community.

The 14 member delegation of the CII is composed of chairmen of major companies seeking to establish partnerships in the Maldives to undertake development projects in various sectors, from

infrastructure and housing, to health care and information technology. The Confederation of Indian Industry is an institution involved in industrial development work, and has over 7000 members, including some of the largest and most notable companies in India.

Single session work of previous govt. - Zahiya

The single session system of education currently practiced in schools was initially thought out and to large extent planned out by the former government and that the current government cannot take the credit for it, former education minister of President Gayoom's administration, Zahiya Zarerer has said.

Responding to a question posed by Miadhu Daily, former minister Zahiya said that decision to run schools on single session was taken during the Dr. Shaugy's time as education minister and that during her time in office, she had launched the project.

She further revealed that single session system was included one the main objectives of the education sector of 7 th National Development Plan formulated in 2006 and that in this regard, some 9 schools changed their curriculum to single sessions in 2007 in addition to 24 schools in 2008.

" One the main objectives of the 7 th National Development Plan formed in 2006 was to change to the curriculum of all schools to a single session system, in this regard, 9 schools made the change over to single session in 2007 and 24 schools in 2008, despite some people claiming credit for it" Zahiya said.

Former education minister Zahiya also revealed that the plan was to make the transition to single session system in 5 to 6 years, as well as construct 3 more schools in Male' and 2 schools in Addu.

"We had planned to make the change over to single session within 5 to 6 years, as 3 more schools in Male' and 2 in Addu atoll were required to effectively manage the transition" Zahiya revealed.

Dr. Mahmoud Shaugy, former Education Minister who held office before Zahiya, commenting on the matter, expressed that the idea of running schools on a single sessions precedes his time. He said the idea was in the pipe line even during Dr. Mohamed Latheef's time as education minister.

"As Zahiya mentioned, even though it was in the process during my time as minister, most of the work was carried out during Zahiya's time, I believe that the policy is actually of the previous government and to continue the policy is important, the people must also acknowledge the work of the incumbent government towards full implementation of the policy, actually the idea of single session was there even during Dr. Mohamed Latheef's time" Dr. Shaugy said.

Brothers arrested for possession of drugs

Two brothers from the island of Velidhoo of Noonu atoll has arrested for possession of substances suspected to be drugs.

Velidhoo Police Station revealed that the two brothers were arrested early Friday morning for possession of 32 packets of substances believed to be drugs. The brothers identified as Mohamed Fazeel, 31 and Ahmed Fazeel , 23 of Sunny Side of the island was taken in to custody in a special seek out operation carried out following a tip off from the general public.

In a search carried out after the arrest some 24 packets containing substances believed to be narcotic drugs were found concealed on Mohamed Fazeel's body. Police informed Mohamed Fazeel was recently released from prison under parole. Police also revealed that some 8 packets of suspected drugs were found on Ahmed Fazeel.

Police further revealed that two brothers have detained on drug charges on various occasions and that the matter is currently under investigations by the Drug Enforcement Unit of Maldives Police Services.

60 seats required to bring country back on track - Gayoom

If Dhivehi Rahyithunge Party (DRP) is able secure 60 seats in the forthcoming parliamentary elections the party will be able to put the country back on track and bring further development, DRP leader and former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom has said.

He made the statement speaking at the party's General Assembly held on Sunday night at Dharubaaruge.

Speaking at the General Assembly, DRP Leader said the free democratic system established in the country is a system which has provided many greats benefits to the people and one which the people should fully abide. As such the forthcoming elections should be one which provides the people the right to cast their votes freely and independently without the influence of any body.

"No body should exert pressure or attempt to influence the voter decision; this is directly against all principles of democracy" Gayoom said.

He further said that the country is going in the wrong direction and to put the country back on track, DRP needs to succeed the oncoming parliamentary elections.

"A few nights ago, I said we need to win,not just 50 seats but a minimum of 60 seats, if we are able to secure 60 seats out of 75 seats in the Majlis, then DRP will be able to bring the country back on track, then we will able to protect the country's Islamic faith, then there will be no opportunity for other religions in Maldives, the country's political system will prevail, nobody will be able interfere with the country's sovereignty" Gayoom said.

Former President Gayoom, speaking about the ongoing deception tactics employed by some people, said that certain groups are attempting to mislead the people as to who is actually responsible for democratic reforms enjoyed today. He said despite such attempts the people of the country are fully aware that it was the previous government that is the architect of the democratic reforms.

Umar accuse President of deception

Islamic Democratic Party (IDP) Leader Umar Naseer has accused President Mohamed Nasheed of deception. He accused the President of trying to distort the meaning of his remarks that the President should refrain from carrying out campaign activity on government's expense despite having the right to carry out any campaign the President wants.

Speaking to Miadhu Daily, Umar said "I am calling on the President not to use state resources in MDP campaigns, for example, not to use government money and launches in MDP campaigns

trips aimed to rally support for MDP candidates, not to call on the people to elect MDP members to facilitate a Majlis majority to MDP".

Umar said the President, while speaking on the IDP's news release on the matter has misled the people and attempted to distort the intent of news release.

"We are not calling the President not to campaign, what we are calling for is for him to stop using state resources on his party campaign trips" Umar said. Umar further said he is fully appreciative of every citizen's right to engage in any campaign they want but for the people to reap the rewards of good governance , he said believed that such campaigns should not be at the expense of the government.

"The change ushered in by people is doing away with ways we have been practicing previously, doing away with the practice of suing people's money to do private campaigns, if we are to repeat such practices then this is not a change for the better" IDP Leader Umar said.

Nasheed's govt. lacks economic plan – Yameen

People's Association President Abdulla Yamin has criticized Nasheed's government saying it lacks an economic plan. He also said that Nasheed's talks in atolls are indicative of his ignorance of economical matters.

Responding to a question by Miadhu Daily regarding the feasibility of President Nasheed's pledges during his visits to the atolls, such as promises of establishing housing units and sewage systems and in some instances gifting fishing vessels to islands, in the face of the current global and domestic economic situation Yamin said he finds it astonishing that Nasheed is making new pledges while he has yet to deliver on the ones he made during his Presidential campaign.

"The current administration does not have an economic plan. Anni is making new promises without delivering on his campaign pledges." said Yamin, half brother of the former president and current N. Atoll MP. "I think that this government does not have any economic schemes. There has been no word of an economic plan from any ministry. But Anni is visiting islands and making promises without even announcing a plan." Yamin said. He also stated that such promises can only be fulfilled under a particular economic scheme and that Nasheed cannot dip into the government budget whenever he wants.

"Some islands have been promised vessels, others, with smaller populations have been promised housing units." Yamin said. "But a certain period is needed to accomplish these things. The government budget cannot be used at whim. We would be supportive however, if the government plans to gift dhonis under a scheme to develop domestic fisheries. But such things cannot be done in order to secure votes for the upcoming election." He said.

Yamin has questioned where Nasheed's economic endorsers are now, referring to Solah Shihab and Adam Manik.

All major parties to contest elections

According to survey conducted by Miadhu Daily, all major political parties will be contesting the forthcoming parliamentary elections. While some parties are still finalizing candidates who will be contesting on party ticket, other parties has already held primaries and has awarded party tickets.

Some 40 candidates from Jumhoory Party (JP) will be contesting the oncoming parliamentary elections, JP Deputy Leader ADK Ahmed Nashid has revealed.

He revealed that candidates who will be contesting on the party ticket have been finalized and that names of the candidates will soon be revealed ands although names are not officially released, the candidates are already busy campaigning. Nashid said his party is contesting constituencies which are important to the party and ones which the party is sure to win.
JP Deputy Leader and member of the People's Majlis for Dhaalu atoll Nashid also said it is not the intention of Jumhoory Party to secure all the seats in the Majlis and that it is highly unlikely any party will be able to win a majority.

Responding to Miadhu Daily on his party's preparations for the oncoming parliamentary elections, Leader of Islamic Democratic Party (IDP) Umar Naseer said candidates contesting on the party's ticket have not been finalized and that necessary discussions on the matter are underway. He said there is no urgency in finalizing candidates as even election date is also not finalized by the Election Commission.

According to IDP Deputy Leader Hassan Manik some 20 members have asked for the party ticket, although the number of candidates who will be contesting the parliamentary elections on IDP ticket is yet to be finalized.

"20 members have applied for party ticket but I cannot, at this point in time, say how many will be contesting on IDP ticket". Hassan Manik said.

Providing information on his party's preparations to secure Majlis seats in the oncoming parliamentary elections, Leader of Maldivian National Congress (MNC) Monaza Naeem confirmed that his party will be contesting the elections. However, he said it is not his party's motto to speak out in advance and release details of all plans and that is aim is to achieve his objectives.

"Our people will also contest the elections, discussions on the matter are ongoing in the party's council, even though we are having multi party elections, and the people are yet ripe for elections under party system" Naeem said.

One of the parties who are gearing up for the oncoming parliamentary elections, with high hopes, is the party heading the ruling coalition, Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP). In this regard, some 116 candidates have contested for the party ticket and had two rounds of primaries. As of now, 57 candidates have won party ticket. Party's Leader, the incumbent President of the country, Mohamed Nasheed in a recent rally has revealed that his party will be able win at least 50 seats, which will afford the ruling party a clear majority in the Majlis, something which the opposition parties are bent on preventing. Opposition parties have claimed Majlis majority to the ruling party may adversely affect the freedom and the rights of the people.

"MDP, this time, wants to win at least 50 seats, we can achieve this target; we have candidates from families who are well known to the people" MDP Chief, incumbent President Mohamed Nasheed has said at a party general assembly held on Friday.

The main opposition party, Dhivehi Rahyithunge Party (DRP) despite its intentions to contest all the 76 constituencies, have officially announced names of candidates contesting 40 constituencies. DRP has also revealed independent candidates as well as members of other parties supporting DRP will also be contesting on DRP ticket.

"We want 60 seats, not just 50 seats, we have candidates who are loved and supported by the people, we are by far the most populous party in the country" DRP Leader Gayoom expressed at recent general assembly of the party.

Rf. 150,000 missing from MIFCO safe at Kooddoo

Investigations has been launched to find out exactly why Rf.150, 000 is missing from the MIFCO safe at Kooddoo Fisheries Complex.

Speaking on the matter, the company's media coordinator Abdulla Maumoon informed that the monies are missing from the safe where funds are kept for the purposes of buying fish and not from the company's main safe. He also said the funds went missing on Saturday and that since then all necessary precautions has been taken.

He further said company's internal auditors of the company are currently cross checking and that Maldives Police Services has been officially asked to investigate the matter.

"Our internal auditors are currently auditing, we have provided all necessary details to Maldives Police Services and have made a formal request to begin necessary investigations" Maumoon said.

In January 2006 large numbers of counterfeit 500 Rufiyaa notes were found in MIFCO main safe.

Despite budget cuts services remain unaffected – Ali Didi

Despite 60 percent reduction of its budget, the quality of services being afforded by the Maldives High Commission in Sri Lanka remains unaffected and that it will remain unaffected in times to come, Maldives High Commissioner to Sri Lanka Ali Hussain Didi has revealed.

He revealed that the proposed High Commission's budget of Rf.11 million had to be reduced to Rf.5 million as part of the government campaign to reduce its expenditure and minimize wastage.

In an exclusive interview granted to Miadhu Daily, Maldives High Commissioner accredited to Sri Lanka said that Maldivians residing in Sri Lanka and Maldivians visiting Sri Lanka for various reasons will not face any difficulties due to the budget cuts and that despite the budget cuts some of the services being provided by the High Commission has been widened.

Ali Hussain Didi revealed that even though some of the services, which does not fall within the mandate and scope of the High Commission, has been discontinued when President Nasheed's government came in to power on November 11 last year, all services which are normally afforded by any embassy in any foreign country are being provided or continued.

High Commissioner Ali Hussain Didi further revealed that the commission has made arrangements for Maldivian students in Sri Lanka to study Dhievhi language and recite Holy Quran and that all such initiatives by Maldivian Students Association or by parents will be most welcome and appreciated.

"Now , the classes conducted at Sosun Villa is not full; if these classes are full and more classes are required then the government is ready and will cater for such an increase in demand" He said.

He further revealed that as part of the government's efforts to ease the existing visa difficulties faced by Maldivian students and families, the government has held talks with Sri Lankan authorities and that a welcome change will be announced in coming months.

According to information received to Miadhu Daily, President Nasheed during his recent state visit to Sri Lanka discussed the issue of easing visa difficulties faced by the Maldivian Diaspora in Sri Lanka at the highest levels.

HRCM holds workshop on International Human Rights law

Human Rights Commission of the Maldives (HRCM) in collaboration with Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law (RWI) has commenced a workshop on International Human Rights Law on Sunday.

The training is being conducted by trainers from Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law and is held at Bandos Island Resort from 1st to 5th February 2009. The opening ceremony was attended by commission members, facilitators of the workshop Chris Sidoti, Vasu Pillai, Jason Naum and Amelie Sallfors and staff of the Human Rights Commission.

Speaking at the inauguration ceremony, RWI consultant Vasu Pillai, stated that Maldives Human Rights Commission has been very impressive in its accomplishment during its short period of existence and highlighted the investigation of the death of Hussain Solah and the rapid assessment of housing situation in Maldives as milestone achievements of HRCM. In addition, RWI consultant Chris Sidoti also commented on the work of HRCM and the importance of international human rights law.

President of Maldives HRC, Ahmed Saleem, in his comments at the inauguration ceremony highlighted the importance of the workshop and the past activities of the commission.

The objective of this training is to build capacity of HRCM staff on International Human Rights Law and its application and human rights issues concerning Maldives, HRCM has said.

Maldives to compete in 7 wonders nature campaign

Maldives has been nominated for the New 7 Wonders of Nature campaign, according to a statement issued by Maldives Tourism Promotion Board (MATI). The campaign is a process in which seven natural wonders of the world are chosen by people through a global poll which will be declared in the year 2011.

The campaign is being organized by the Swiss based New 7 Wonders Foundation after their success in organizing the New Seven Wonders of the World in 2007. 261 qualified national and multinational nominees are now competing to make it to the top 77.

MATI has called on all concerned to vote for Maldives by visiting www.visitmaldives.com or www.new7wonders.com. Voting continues from January 7th until July 7th 2009 to determine the top 77 in each of the seven competing categories. The New7Wonders Panel of Experts will select the 21 finalists from the top 77 nominees.

MATI has called all Maldivians, fans and well wishers of Maldives to vote for Maldives to make the country one of the Natural Wonders of the World.

MYANMAR:

Indonesian navy rescues boat people from Myanmar

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) - An Indonesian navy official says 198 boat people from Myanmar have been picked up off the coast of Aceh in critical condition.

Officer Tedi Sutardi, citing witness accounts, said Tuesday that 22 passengers died on a 21-day voyage from Thailand.

The small wooden boat was found by fisherman Monday drifting off northern Sumatra.

Sutardi says it had no engine and that the passengers had run out of food and water.

It is the second load of Rohingyas, a stateless Muslim group facing decades of persecution in Myanmar, to arrive in Indonesia in a month.

Democratic Voice of Burma: Arrest warrants issued for six defence lawyers – Khin Hnin Htet

Mon 2 Feb 2009

Filed under: News, Inside Burma

Authorities have issued arrest warrants for six lawyers who have been involved in cases defending political activists, according to a source close to the lawyers.

The six lawyers are Kyaw Ho, Myint Thaung, Maung Maung Latt, Aung Than Myint, Khin Htay Kywe, and Nyi Nyi Hlaing.

A Rangoon resident who is close to the lawyers said the authorities were trying to intimidate lawyers into not taking political cases.

"The lawyers are from the National League for Democracy so they offer their legal services in political cases," the resident said.

"When they do so, they openly express their legal arguments as permitted under the law," he said.

"[Lawyers] U Aung Thein, U Khin Maung Shein, and Ko Pho Phyu were arrested for that. The authorities want to scare lawyers away from people who are involved in politics."

The resident said the issuing of arrest warrants against the defence lawyers was also likely to hurt political activists now in detention.

"Political activists who are currently being detained are bound to suffer from the authorities' action against lawyers," the resident said.

"Political activists have been oppressed for many years now and they are serving long prison terms in distant prisons and their families are suffering," he said.

"The issuing of arrest warrants against their lawyers is meant to weaken their resistance."

Kyaw Ho said he had not heard anything about an arrest warrant being issued against him.

This is the latest case of the authorities' harassment of lawyers dealing with political cases.

Lawyer Pho Phyu, who was taken into custody on 15 January, is still being detained in a police cell in Magwe.

Three other lawyers who have defended political activists – Nyi Nyi Htwe and Rangoon Supreme Court lawyers Aung Thein and Khin Maung Shein – are currently serving prison sentences.

UN envoy speaks to Myanmar pro-democracy leader

Myanmar News.Net

Monday 2nd February, 2009

The United Nations special envoy to Myanmar, Ibrahim Gambari, has had talks with pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who is under house arrest.

Ms Suu Kyi, who has spent much of the past 19 years under arrest, would not meet Mr Gambari during his last visit six months ago due to what she perceived as a slowdown in the reform process.

Mr Gambari is on a mission to open dialogue between Myanmar's opposition and military rulers.

He has stated he is in Myanmar to urge the release of political prisoners and discuss the country's ailing economy.

Mr Gambari has already had talks with Foreign Minister Nyan Win but has not yet been invited to meet head of state, General Than Shwe.

New York Times: For refugees, recession makes hard times even harder – Erk Eckholm

Mon 2 Feb 2009

Filed under: News, International

After escaping violence in Burma and spending 27 years in the bamboo huts of a United Nations camp in Thailand, Nyaw Paw, 33, arrived in the United States last August to face the traumatic adjustment and cultural vertigo known to every refugee.

But with high rents, lagging federal aid and now a recession that is drying up entry-level work, the transition has become harder than ever, refugee workers say. Overwhelming housing costs are its starkest symptom. Many new arrivals spend 90 percent or more of their income on rent and utilities, leaving them virtually no disposable income and creating enormous hardships.

Ms. Nyaw Paw, who was placed in Salt Lake City with her two sons, ages 6 and 13, has scraped together the $600 rent on their one-bedroom apartment from federal payments that ended in December. Now, her only income is a welfare grant of about $500 a month; a private aid agency fills the gap.

Ms. Nyaw Paw has tried for traditional starter jobs, like motel housekeeping, but no one is hiring here. Her life demands such frugality that she washes the family clothes in the bathtub rather than feeding quarters to the machine down the hall.

"I think about the rent every minute," Ms. Nyaw Paw said through a translator, "and I don't know what I'll do when the aid programs run out."

Poor refugees — like low-income Americans — can apply for rent subsidies, which require that recipients spend 30 percent of their income on rent, with the federal government picking up the rest. But in Salt Lake City, there is a two-year waiting list, and it is longer in many other cities.

Starting in February, in the first program of its kind, Utah plans to soften the huge and growing burden of housing costs by providing rent subsidies to recently arrived families for up to two years. The money is being drawn from unspent federal welfare reserves. Under the welfare reforms of 1996, states can use the federal grant flexibly for families that already qualify for welfare, mainly single-parent families like Ms. Nyaw Paw's. For them, such help will make a world of difference.

Refugees arrive in the United States with a one-time State Department grant of about $450 a person and temporary help from a private agency to assist them toward economic self-sufficiency.

Apart from a number of Iraqis who arrive with professional degrees, most refugees these days arrive from Africa and Asia with little education or experience of Western life, and no relatives in this country to help.

Federal aid for refugee resettlement has not risen with the cost of living, state welfare programs are skimpier than before and low-income housing is ever scarcer. Meanwhile, the jobs that refugees have often ridden to success, like working in warehouses and hotels, are disappearing or being filled by people laid off from other jobs.

"People are hurting here, often spending 85 to 90 percent of their incomes or more on rent, and they can hardly do anything else," said Gerald Brown, who was recently appointed Utah's first director of refugee services.

Utah takes in about 1,000 refugees a year, and recently they included a preponderance of Burmese, Nepali Bhutanese, Iraqis and Somalis. During home visits to four families, Mr. Brown said, he found to his dismay that none had the heat on, saving on utility bills in this chilly city among snow-covered mountains; babies and grandparents alike wore heavy coats and wool hats.

The International Rescue Committee, one of 10 private groups that the State Department pays to usher refugees through their first months, has provided some furniture, toys and basics like detergent. Food stamps enable them to eat. But Ms. Nyaw Paw's older boy has begged in vain for a computer; other families with infants say they cannot afford diapers, and many of the thousands of refugees living in Salt Lake City cannot even think about going to a movie.

Utah will also use part of its welfare fund to enable the International Rescue Committee and Catholic Community Services to provide advice and emergency aid to families for two years, rather than the current six months, which has proved too brief for many dislocated arrivals.

"The most vulnerable time for refugees is the first year or two," said Patrick Poulin, local resettlement director for the International Rescue Committee. "A good number make it on their own over time, but these new programs will accelerate that."

The housing plan has drawn no significant opposition in Utah, which is generally seen as friendly to refugees. But the size of the American refugee program, which admitted about 60,000 people last year and

is widely regarded as advancing humanitarian and foreign policy goals, has been questioned by some. Critics say the United States allows in too many people who are surely going to require public aid yet have alternative places to live — for example, Ms. Nyaw Paw, by this argument, could have remained in Thailand.

“We are much too permissive about letting refugees in,” said Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, a research group that favors reducing immigration.

Refugee admissions, Mr. Krikorian said, should be held “to the very small number of people who don’t have and won’t have any place else to go.”

Once people are admitted, he said, they should receive the necessary help, and he had no problem with Utah’s new rental aid.

Lul Omar of Somalia, who keeps her head covered by a scarf and her fingertips dark with henna, is scraping by in Salt Lake City. After seeing her husband killed in their home, she fled to Saudi Arabia and then to a United Nations camp in Egypt. She and her seven children, a lanky crew ages 4 to 15, arrived here in October 2007.

The International Rescue Committee helped Ms. Omar find an older, small four-bedroom house, which she has decorated with a few plastic flowers. The monthly rent of $1,095, she said, “is the biggest problem I have.”

She works eight hours a day, at $6 an hour, putting price stickers on used clothing at Deseret Industries, a Mormon Church version of Good Will Industries. To get there from her home, she must take two buses and a tram, more than an hour each way. She is grateful for the work, but her slender earnings caused her welfare payment to drop, to $385 a month.

“We can’t buy clothing or even soap,” Ms. Omar said, explaining that she relies on charity for such necessities.

“I feel so bad,” Ms. Omar said. “The kids are always asking me for a little bit of money so they can buy a soda after school, but usually I don’t have any.”

Ms. Nyaw Paw, an ethnic Karen who still wears blouses she embroidered in the Thai camp, recently learned that the new rent-aid program could give her a few hundred dollars more each month, reinforcing the reasons she applied to come to the United States in the first place: to give her children opportunities.

“If I got that extra money,” she said, “I’d save it in the bank, for the kids when they get older.”

Acknowledging the forced drabness of life today, she added that the money would provide a few comforts. “Maybe they’ll want to go out with friends,” she said.

✉ UN special envoy meets Myanmar's Suu Kyi

Myanmar News.Net

Monday 2nd February, 2009 (IANS)

UN special envoy Ibrahim Gambari Monday met Myanmar's opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi at a government guest house in Yangon, officials said.

The meeting lasted about one hour and 20 minutes, witnesses said. The content of the talks was not immediately revealed but should be disclosed later Monday when Gambari was scheduled to meet members of Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy, Myanmar's main opposition party.

Gambari, who arrived in Yangon Saturday, is in Myanmar to push for a political dialogue between the ruling junta and Suu Kyi, who has been under house arrest since May 2003.

On his last trip in August, Suu Kyi refused to see Gambari on the grounds that he had failed to meet with the country's military supremo, Senior General Than Shwe, Myanmar's prime decision-maker.

It was still unclear Monday whether Gambari would be granted an interview with Than Shwe on his current trip.

Informed sources said Gambari's trip might be designed to test the waters for a potential visit by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.

Gambari was also scheduled to visit parts of the Irrawaddy delta, which was devastated by Cyclone Nargis in May, 2008.

The cyclone left 140,000 dead or missing and 2.4 million in dire need of emergency assistance, the delivery of which was initially hampered by the military but finally allowed in.

Democratic Voice of Burma: Shan leader Shwe Ohn to contest 2010 election – Htet Aung Kyaw

Mon 2 Feb 2009

Filed under: News, Inside Burma

Shan leader Shwe Ohn has said he will stand for election in 2010, despite his opposition to the State Peace and Development Council's national convention and 2008 constitution.

Shwe Ohn, 87, said he had written to the chair of the State Peace and Development Council, the Internal Affairs Ministry and the Electoral Commission on 26 January to register his party, the Union Democracy League, for the 2010 election.

"It's a bit new for people who have only just heard about the formation of the political party," Shwe Ohn said.

"I have been talking about it for six years now. I was not allowed to form the party before."

Shwe Ohn said he had used the word 'Union' in the party name to include the 135 national races of Burma and has been openly preparing the party manifesto.

When asked whether his participation in the 2010 election undermined the results of the 1990 election and minimised his imprisonment with Hkun Htun Oo for opposing the national convention, Shwe Ohn said he felt he had to work within the current system.

"I have said from the beginning that I don't like it, I don't support it. But inevitably, I have to accept it," Shwe Ohn said.

"Accepting it is different from supporting it. We shouted our opposition to the referendum, but it was finished," he said.

"We did not like the way it finished, but we did not have the strength to destroy it."

Shwe Ohn said now was the time to be pragmatic and make strategies for the situation as it is and not as the opposition might like it to be.

"I think it will hurt us more if we keep on shouting when there is no possibility [of success]," he said.

"It has nothing to do with whether we like what happened in the past. Even if we do not like it we have to accept it if we can't dismantle it," he explained.

"That's what's called realpolitik. We can't keep on imagining things are the way we want them to be, good and useful to people."

Shwe Ohn is a member of the United Nationalities League for Democracy and attended the Panglong conference in 1947 as a reporter.

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Kaladan Press: Rohingya groups condemn the SPDC's statement on Rohingya

Mon 2 Feb 2009

Filed under: News, International

Chittagong, Bangladesh: Rohingya groups released statements against the State Peace and Development Council, or SPDC's statement on Rohingya as a non citizen of Burma which issued on January 30, in New Light of Myanmar.

"We strongly protest and condemn the SPDC for its lie in 'New Light of Myanmar' dated 30th January 2009 that "Rohinja is not included in over 100 national races of the Union of Myanmar". This is an evil design to deny us of our rights," Nurul Islam, ARNO President said.

It is a baseless remark against the Rohingya minority group "The Rohingya does not include in the list of 120 indigenous groups of Burma and that those boat-people who recently reached to the shore of Thailand are not from Burma" appeared in the military controlled Burmese newspaper dated 30/01/2009," U Hla Aung, President, National Democratic Party of Human Rights or, NDPHR in exile-Paris said.

"The Rohingya are a people characterized by objective criteria, such as historical continuity, and subjective factors including self-identification, which need to define an indigenous people. They are a people having supporting history, separate culture, civilization, language and literature, historically settled territory and reasonable size of population and area

in Arakan - they consider themselves distinct from other sector of the society," the ARNO statement stated.

The Rohingya have been participating in the National and local election and been elected as Members of Parliament since 1936 in the time of colonial rule up to that of 1990 election in the era of current military junta according to the facts and evidence. There was Rohingya Minister too in the Cabinet of U Nu, the first prime minister of Burma, according to the statement of NDPHR.

"Muslim Rohingyas have lived in Arakan for centuries; Muslim Rohingyas are Burmese citizens; Muslim Rohingyas have the same rights and privileges as other citizens of Burma regardless of their ethnic beliefs or ethnic background," according to the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma or, NCGUB (exile government) submitted a "Position Paper on Persecution of Muslims in Arakan State" to the United Nations on September 24, 1992.

From 15th of May 1961 to October 30, 1965, a programme was broadcasted in the Rohingya language, twice a week from the Burmese Broadcasting Service (BBS) under the program of "Indigenous groups". (See: Page (71) "Voice of Myanmar in (30) Years" written by U Kyaw Nyein, director of Ministry of Information, Burma), but later stopped. The Rangoon University Rohingya Students Association was one of the ethnic student associations that functioned from 1959 to 1961 under the registration numbers 113/99 December 1959 and 7/60 September 1960 respectively, stated in both groups of statements.

The first President of Burma Sao Shwe Theik stated: "Muslims of Arakan certainly belong to one of the indigenous races of BurmaK.In fact, there is no pure indigenous race in Burma, if they do not belong to indigenous races of Burma, we also cannot be taken as indigenous races of Burma".

Under Article 3 of the Nu-Attlee Treaty of 17 October 1947, and under Section 11(i)(ii)(iii) the Constitution of the Union of Burma 1947,effected 4 January 1948, the Rohingyas are citizens of Burma.

Arakan was virtually ruled by Muslims from 1430 to 1531. The heyday of Arakan began with the influence and spread of Muslim civilization in Arakan. Coins and medallion were issued inscribing Kalema (the profession of faith in Islam) in Arabic script. Besides, practice of Muslim etiquettes and manners in the court of Arakan, the adoption of Muslim titles by the kings of Arakan and system of governance, the Muslim Quazi courts and literary activities, use of Bengali and Persian as court and official languages, etc. are the evidences of Muslim rule in Arakan, according to ARNO statement.

The military regime affirmed in its official book "Sasana Ronwa Htunzepho" published in 1997, "Islam spread and deeply rooted in Arakan since 8th century from where it further spread into interior Burma". "Myanmar Swezon Kyan" Vol.9, page 89/90 mention 75% of Mayu Frontier is Rohingya. Francis Buchaman stated that he met Rohingya in 1795 at Ava, ARNO statement also stated.

Mizzima News: 29 children suffer from physic nut poisoning – Phanida

Mon 2 Feb 2009

Filed under: News, Inside Burma

Twenty-nine children from State Middle and Primary Schools from Thaketa Township in Rangoon Division, suffered from food poisoning after eating physic nut seeds, according to the Township Education Officer's Office.

Twenty nine students from the State Primary Schools No. 41, 22 and State Middle Schools No. 1 and 7 ate dried physic nut seeds after school in the evening on Jan 28. They picked these dried seeds from physic nut plants grown in their school premises.

"There are 29 students and the rest are from outside. Most of the children are students of State Primary Schools No. 41, 22 and State Middle School No. 7. Most of the students are from SPS No. 41. They ate these dried nuts after school. They suffered from uneasiness and vomiting. That's all," an official from Thaketa Township Education Officer's Office said.

A student's mother told Mizzima that she saw the children suffering from diarrhea, and when asked, they replied that they had eaten dried physic nuts. Several children in the neighborhood ate those nuts on that day.

"We realized that the children from almost every household in our ward were suffering from food poisoning, when many children visited the nearby clinics. Their blood pressure was too low at 50/30 mm Hg when they reached the clinic. The doctors put them on a drip in Thaketa and another 3 bottles of medicine were given to them in Rangoon Children's Hospital. Now they are much better," she said.

The dried physic nuts are rich in taste and the children think they are edible. They picked the dried seeds from the plants and ate together, a 4th Grader student said.

"We were given these seeds by our friends living in 1st Lane. We tasted it and found it had rich taste. Then I picked a (polythene) bagful of the nuts and shared them among our friends. Then we suffered from uneasiness and vomiting," he said.

The children were admitted at local clinics and Thaketa Hospital. Some critical patients were admitted at the Rangoon Children's Hospital on the same night. Most of the children were admitted at the local Thaketa Hospital and were discharged the next day.

"All the children were discharged from the hospital and are back home. They are feeling much better. Those, who were admitted at Rangoon Hospital, were also discharged. Our Director General himself visited them on Sunday. Their condition has improved," an official from the Basic Education Department said.

There are two types of toxins in physic nuts. The symptoms of physic nut food poisoning are nausea, uneasiness, stomach pain, low blood pressure and exhaustion with continuous diarrhea. The condition of such a patient will normalize if proper treatment is given within 48 hours, a leading doctor from Rangoon said.

Similarly, 2 students from SPS No. 38 suffered from physic nut food poisoning in the end of last year. They had to take medical treatment for two days.

There were 27 physic nut food poisoning cases in 2007 and 69% of them were school children.

Under the fuel self-sufficiency scheme, the government has launched nationwide physic nut plantation projects since December 2005.

Xinhua: Indian Vice-President to visit Myanmar

Mon 2 Feb 2009

Filed under: News, Business / Trade

Indian Vice-President Shri M. Hamid Ansari will pay an official visit to Myanmar in the near future, an official announcement from Nay Pyi Taw said on Monday without specifying the date of his visit.

Ansari's Myanmar trip, which is a reciprocal one to that to India made by Vice-Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council Vice Senior-General Maung Aye in April last year, will focus on economic cooperation between the two countries, Indian sources said.

During Maung Aye's April New Delhi visit, three documents between the two governments were signed — a framework agreement on the construction and operation of a multi-modal transit and transport facility on

the Kaladan River connecting the Sittway Port in Myanmar with the Indian state of Mizoram; a memorandum of understanding on intelligence exchange to combat transnational crime including terrorism; and an agreement on avoidance of double taxation for investors from the two countries and prevention of fiscal evasion with respect to taxes on income.

The framework agreement includes upgrading of Sittway Port of Myanmar, improvement tasks for running of vessels along the route of Kaladan from Sittway Port to Sitpyitpyin and construction of roads from Sitpyitpyin to the border region.

In June last year, Indian Minister of State for Commerce and Power Shri Jairam Ramesh visited Nay Pyi Taw, during which four more economic cooperation agreements were also inked.

In November of the year, Myanmar and India held its 9th round of consultations between foreign offices of the two countries at deputy minister level, agreeing to cooperate in a wide range of areas of mutual interest and promptly implement the bilateral agreements inked during Maung Aye's India visit.

The Nation (Thailand): Rogue state creates refugee crisis in Asia – Sai Wansai

Mon 2 Feb 2009

Filed under: News, Opinion, Other

With Rohingya boat people washing up almost daily on Thai shores, it is appropriate that the Thai government call for a conference involving all concerned countries, including Burma, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia and India, to find solutions.

The heart of the rohingya problem is the Burmese military regime's denial of its right to exist officially as an accepted ethnic group within Burma. The bulk of the rohingya population, a Muslim ethnic group, resides in the northern Arakan state of western Burma. It is believed that 800,000 rohingya in Burma have not been granted citizenship. Around a half-million rohingya fled military crackdowns in 1978 and 1991. The majority moved to Bangladesh, and many remain in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Thailand and Malaysia

While the rohingya problem has aroused willingness among concerned states to look for a solution, it should also be noted that the woes of refugees stemming the Shan, Karen, Karenni and Mon states bordering Thailand are identical, where oppression, genocide and human rights abuses are concerned. Thus, it is quite clear that illegal migration across the region is fast becoming a transnational issue and that a multilateral approach is the only way out.

But the root cause of this illegal migration is the Burmese military regime's failed policies and entrenched racist mindset. In other words, its failure to recognise that Burma is a multi-ethnic state. To achieve its goal, the Burmese military goes along with its implementation of protecting "national sovereignty" and "national unity" at all costs. This gives way to open conflict resulting in more suppression and gross human rights violations.

In short, the Burmese regime must realise its zero-sum plan of total elimination of the opposition parties; racial supremacy implementation; and gross human rights violations are not working to its advantage.

The concerned stakeholders should coax or persuade the ruling Burmese generals to pave the way for positive change. Otherwise, the refugee problem stemming from Burma, and affecting neighbouring countries, will continue for a long time to come.

Malaysian Star: Learning haven – Sharmilla Ganesan

Mon 2 Feb 2009

Filed under: News, Opinion, Other

WALK down one of the rubbish-strewn lanes in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, and you will come across the narrow entrance to a nondescript flat. Just minutes away are some of the glitziest malls in the city, but here, the atmosphere couldn't be more different.

Small, messy stalls line the lane, and the people walking around, going about their daily business, look distinctly non-local.

Inside the building, the stairwell is dim, grubby, and rather dank. Climb up three flights of stairs and you will arrive at a cramped unit. Clothes-lines hang right outside the flat's narrow corridor, aflutter with the day's washing. With its shabby walls and linoleum-lined floors, this unit looks no different from any of the others in the building.

Except for the large group of laughing, chattering children sitting inside. Their eyes are on an adult who is pointing to a whiteboard and speaking loudly. Surrounding them are piles of books and stationery; more sit on the bookshelves lining one side of the room.

Hand-drawn posters and educational charts liven up the plain walls, and two computers sit in a corner. These children are Myanmar refugees of Chin ethnicity, forced to flee to Malaysia to escape religious persecution and human rights violations.

The children do not wear uniforms, there are no desks or chairs, and classrooms are simply different units on the same floor. Yet, for the 150 students who study here daily, this little flat is the closest thing to a school they have in Malaysia. More significantly, it is their only hope for some form of education as they wait for a solution to their problems.

The Chins, who hail from the Chin State in western Myanmar, are one of eight major ethnic groups in the conflict-ridden country. The majority of the Chins are Christians. Like other communities in the Buddhist-majority nation, many Chins have been fleeing their homeland to escape the harsh living conditions under the present military government.

As of November last year, there are some 44,000 refugees and asylum seekers registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Malaysia. Of these, 39,000 are from Myanmar. The Chins make up 14,300 or 37%, of that number.

As Malaysia did not sign the 1951 Refugee Convention, refugees are not allowed to settle here permanently. They can be here on a temporary basis, waiting either for resettlement by the UNHCR, or for the unrest in their home countries to be resolved. The refugees' uncertain status, however, creates a host of complications.

They are not able to get formal employment, which leaves them not only struggling for money, but also open to exploitation by unscrupulous employers. Many of them cannot even afford the healthcare available at government hospitals and clinics. Refugee children are also not able to attend government schools, and most of them cannot afford private education.

This is where schools such as the one described above play a key role. Supported by local NGO Malaysian Care and UNHCR, this school is one of six that are scattered in various locations in the Klang Valley. The classes are run by the Chin Student Organisation (CSO), which was founded by a group of Myanmar refugees in 2005. The organisation was started as a means of providing Chin children access to education.

The importance of education to these children cannot be overstated. The CSO views it as the means to a brighter future. With the majority of parents struggling to find work or making do with menial labour jobs, these classes are not only a way for the children to obtain some form of learning, but also prepare them for the future that awaits them if and when they are resettled.

"Our organisation's motto is: 'Hope for the future'," says CSO secretary Billy Bawi Cung, who is one of the nine teachers at the school. "Education is our one chance (for a better future), both for our people and our country. These children are our only hope, and through education, we wish to give them a better life than the one we had back home."

CSO chairman Cung Lian Thawng (who is known as Thawng) adds that due to the unrest in their home country, some of the children don't even know what school is like. "Every child deserves to go to school, deserves to learn. That is why we are doing this," he says.

Besides being a teacher at the school, Thawng is also one of the founders of the CSO. "Most of the children in our community here just stay at home, because there is nothing for them to do," says Thawng. "So we started thinking about what we could do to help them, and that is how the idea for CSO started."

The school's semester is from January to early December, and classes are held from 10am to 2pm, Monday to Friday. The students range from three to 17 years of age, and are divided into five classes: pre-school, kindergarten, and grades one to three. They are taught four subjects: English, Mathematics, Science and Chin Literature.

The teaching of the Chin language and literature is an important aspect of the school because, according to Billy and Thawng, the subject is no longer taught in schools in Myanmar. "We were taught our language and literature when we were younger, but it isn't allowed anymore," says Billy. "It is sad, but the truth is, many of our children don't know our own language."

Many of the children only started learning English through this school. Billy proudly shares how three of their former students have gone on to receive awards in their schools after being resettled in the United States.

The teachers, who are all CSO members, go beyond the call of duty to ensure that the school runs smoothly. Besides organising activities like sing-alongs and games to keep the students entertained, the teachers even cook meals for the children's breaks. They also organise events like indoor games, sports day, annual concerts and excursions for the children.

The teachers and CSO members are also involved in raising funds for the school. They come up with a weekly newsletter on the local Chin community, and sell it at their church every week. They also look for donations from private donors.

Looking at the children, it is apparent that coming to school is one of the day's highlights. Bawi Hnem, 17, who has been in Malaysia for the past four years, shyly shares that the school has improved her knowledge. "It also makes life more enjoyable for us. We come to school, meet people and make friends," she says.

Elen, 14, agrees, saying that he could not speak a word of English before coming to Malaysia a year ago. Now he can understand the language and speak it a little. He adds that his favourite subject is Science.

Amidst all the difficulties these children are facing, the impact of efforts like this is best summed up in the profound words of Ester Moe, 11: "I love coming here because I have a school now; I have a chance to learn."

Xinhua: South Korean company seeks investment in mineral exploration in Myanmar

Mon 2 Feb 2009

Filed under: News, Business / Trade

A South Korean leading private company is seeking investment in mineral exploration in a major mine in Myanmar's northern Shan state, the local weekly Yangon Times reported in this week's issue.

Confirmed by the South Korean Embassy here, the Korean HC Company has coordinated with the Myanmar mining authorities to make investment in the Yadanar Theinki mining block on a mutually-beneficial basis and a field survey running for a period of up to one year will be conducted by Korean experts soon.

The South Korean company's intentional investment in the mining sector will be the first in Myanmar, the report said.

According to the journal's report, South Korea stands the fifth largest foreign investor in Myanmar injecting 50 million U.S. dollars in the oil and gas sector. Total Korean investment amounted to about 350 million dollars in the fiscal year 2007-08.

According to earlier official report, three S Korean companies– Korea Resources Corporation (KRC), Daewoo International Corporation and Taihan Electric Wire joined the Canadian company of Ivanhoe in producing copper in three blocks of Sabetaung, Letpadaung and Kyisintaung near Monywa in Sagaing division under an agreement reached among them in January 2006.

The copper mining activities have been undertaken by the Canadian company since 1996 with 39,000 tons of copper producing annually.

Other firms engaged in mineral exploration in Myanmar include those from Australia, China, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the United States.

Official statistics show that foreign contracted investment in Myanmar's mining sector has amounted to about 534.19 million U.S. dollars as of the end of 2007 since the country opened to such investment in late 1988, accounting for 3.6 percent of 14.736 billion dollars' total foreign investment and standing as the sixth largest sector.

BBC News: Suu Kyi demands prisoner release

Mon 2 Feb 2009

Filed under: News, Inside Burma

Burma's detained pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi has told a UN envoy the secretary general should not visit until political prisoners are freed.

During their first meeting for nearly a year, Ms Suu Kyi told Ibrahim Gambari there was no rule of law, citing harsh jail terms handed down to activists.

Mr Gambari is trying to revive reconciliation talks between the military government and the opposition.

Aung San Suu Kyi has spent much of the past 19 years under house arrest.

She snubbed Mr Gambari during his last visit in August because of his failure to extract any meaningful concessions from Burma's military rulers.

No defence

Members of Ms Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party (NLD) said she told the envoy that "she was ready and willing to meet anyone, but she could not accept having meetings without achieving any outcome".

NLD spokesman Nyan Win said she also warned that UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon should not visit Burma until after herself, the NLD's deputy leader and other political prisoners were released.

The Nobel Prize winner also criticised the harsh prison sentences recently given to more than 250 people.

"She pointed out that the long prison sentences, such as 65 or 100 years, were handed down with no defence and no lawyers allowed - even lawyers themselves were sentenced," Nyan Win said.

Mr Gambari, who arrived in Burma on Saturday for a four-day visit, has held talks with the foreign minister but it is unclear whether he will be allowed to meet the head of state, General Than Shwe.

The UN envoy told diplomats that his objectives were to urge the release of political prisoners, discuss the country's ailing economy and revive dialogue between Ms Suu Kyi and the junta.

Continuing crackdown

Mr Gambari's seventh trip to the country comes amid criticism that he has failed to achieve Ms Suu Kyi's release or any other discernible progress from his diplomacy.

BBC South East Asia correspondent Jonathan Head says that even if Mr Gambari managed to meet Than Shwe, it was unlikely anything could be achieved.

The military is pushing ahead with a tightly-controlled election next year, which is guaranteed to leave it holding most of the levers of power, he says.

Burma's ruling generals have continued to suppress dissent since crushing mass pro-democracy protests led by monks in September 2007.

Human rights groups say the number of political prisoners being held has doubled to 2,100 since then.

The NLD won a general election in 1990 but the junta refused to allow the party to assume power.

The junta says it will hold elections in 2010 under a revised constitution, a process which the opposition sees as fundamentally flawed.

In recent months, the generals have further consolidated their grip on power, pushing through a constitution which reserves 25% of the seats in any future parliament for the military.

Irrawaddy: Gambari meets NLD Executive Members, including Suu Kyi – Saw Yan Naing

Mon 2 Feb 2009

Filed under: News, Inside Burma

Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi met with Ibrahim Gambari, the United Nations special envoy to Burma, and executive members of her National League for Democracy (NLD) at a government guest house today.

It was the first time that Suu Kyi, who habeen under arrest for 13 of the past 19 years, was permitted to meet with members of her party's Central Executive Committee (CEC) during a visit by the UN envoy.

The meeting took place on Monday morning after Suu Kyi was taken from her lakeside home on University Avenue to meet with Gambari and the NLD members, including party chairman Aung Shwe and senior members Nyunt Wai, Than Htun, Hla Pe and Soe Myint.

Details of the meeting were not available, but NLD spokesman Nyan Win said: "The landscape of his [Gambari's] current trip has changed. It is the first time that the NLD CEC has held talks together with Gambari and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi."

However, he cautioned that it was still too early to say if the visit would yield any positive results. It is believed that Gambari and the NLD executives discussed the arrest and detention of opposition members and activists, as well as NLD demands for the release of all political prisoners.

The meeting lasted about an hour and a half, said Nyan Win. During the meeting, the opposition leaders told the UN envoy that his efforts to broker reconciliation talks would yield tangible result only if all political prisoners are released.

According to reports, Suu Kyi told Gambari that UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon should visit Burma only if she and other political prisoners are released.

Ahead of Gambari's visit, rumors that the ruling regime would release Suu Kyi later this year intensified. Such a move has long been expected, as the junta has often used prisoner releases as a means of deflecting international criticism and to win support for its political agenda.

Gambari, who arrived in Rangoon on Saturday, is scheduled to fly to Naypyidaw on Tuesday, said Nyan Win. It was unclear if he would be able to meet the regime's paramount leader, Snr-Gen Than Shwe.

Some political analysts said that it was unlikely he would meet the senior leader during his four-day trip, but in a statement, the UN said that Gambari hoped to have "meaningful discussions with all concerned."

Burma's top leaders usually shun the UN special envoy. During his last visit to the country in August, Gambari also failed to meet with Suu Kyi. It is not known why she snubbed the UN envoy, but the move was widely interpreted as an expression of frustration with the lack of progress in UN-brokered talks.

On Sunday, Gambari met with Information Minister Brig-Gen Kyaw Hsan and other members of the regime's "Spokes Authoritative Team" in Rangoon.

The UN envoy also held talks with other senior officials, including Aung Kyi, the junta's liaison with the NLD, Foreign Minister Nyan Win, Culture Minister Maj-Gen Khin Aung Myint, Health Minister Kyaw Myint and Thaung Nyunt, a member of the commission for holding the nationwide constitutional referendum, as well as foreign diplomats.

Aung Naing Oo, a political analyst living in Thailand, said little political progress could be expected from Monday's talks, but they would give Suu Kyi's supporters a chance to hear her opinions, the news agency Agence France-Presse reported.

"It's good that they have met. At least the UN knows what she's thinking about, or what the NLD has been thinking about, because it has been a big question mark for the past year," he added.

This is Gambari's seventh visit to Burma since he was appointed special envoy in 2006.

Analysts believe that during the trip, he will also sound out the opinions of regime leaders regarding a possible visit by UN chief Ban Ki-moon, who last visited Burma in May 2008 after a deadly cyclone slammed the country's delta region.

During his visit, he met with Than Shwe. However, the trip was heavily criticized as Ban did not raise the issue of political prisoners or national reconciliation.

Gambari will reportedly also meet with members of the pro-junta National Unity Party and the Committee Representing the People's Parliament, a group consisting of winners of the last election in 1990, which was won overwhelmingly by the NLD.

Meanwhile, the United Nationalities Alliance (UNA), based in Burma, submitted a letter to Gambari suggesting that he broker talks between the regime, the political opposition led by Suu Kyi and leaders of ethnic minorities.

International Herald Tribune: UN reports more opium coming from Myanmar – Thomas Fuller

Mon 2 Feb 2009

Filed under: News, Drugs

Opium poppy cultivation inched up by 3 percent last year in Myanmar, according to a United Nations report released Monday, the second consecutive annual increase that appears to signal a reversal of years of declining opium production in the so-called Golden Triangle.

"Containment of the problem is under threat," Gary Lewis, the representative for East Asia of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, said at a news conference Monday. "Opium prices are rising in this region," he said. "It's going to be an incentive for farmers to plant more."

The Golden Triangle, the area where the borders of Thailand, Laos and Myanmar meet, once produced two-thirds of the world's opium, most of it refined into heroin. But pressure by the Chinese government to eradicate opium in Myanmar helped lead to steep declines, with a low point of 21,500 hectares, or 53,000 acres, of poppies planted in Myanmar in 2006.

Since then, opium cultivation has bounced back by around 33 percent, to 28,500 hectares last year.

UN officials warn that the global economic crisis may fuel an increase in poppy production because falling prices for other crops may persuade farmers to switch to opium.

Leik Boonwaat, the representative in Laos for the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, said corn prices had fallen by half over the past year. The price of opium, by contrast, has increased 26 percent in Laos and 15 percent in Myanmar over the same period.

Farmers in the isolated highlands of the Golden Triangle are also hampered by bad roads and difficulties getting their crops to market. They often find that small parcels of opium are easier to carry across the rough terrain.

Although opium is still grown in parts of Laos, Vietnam and Thailand, UN officials say that about 94 percent of the region's opium comes from Myanmar. Most of the Golden Triangle heroin is sold within the region, Boonwaat said, but small amounts also reach the United States and Australia. Recent seizures of heroin thought to come from the Golden Triangle have been made on the Thai resort island of Phuket, Ho Chi Minh City and Yangon, Myanmar's commercial capital.

The alarming spread of HIV by heroin users in southern China several years ago persuaded the Chinese authorities to crack down on opium and heroin trafficking. Western intelligence officials say Chinese spies are active in anti-narcotics operations in Myanmar, especially in northern areas where central government control is weak.

"There's strong collaboration with Chinese intelligence," Boonwaat said.

The UN report on opium poppy cultivation is based on surveys taken from helicopters and on the ground. The United States relies more heavily on satellite images to calculate opium cultivation, and its reports are sometimes at odds with those of the United Nations.

The UN report did not cover methamphetamine production and distribution, which among some criminal syndicates has displaced opium and heroin in the region.

In Thailand, methamphetamines remain a problem but longstanding efforts by the royal family to substitute opium production with vegetables, coffee and macadamia nuts have virtually wiped out opium production among the northern hill tribes.

Afghanistan remains the world's premier source of opium, producing more than 90 percent of global supply.

Afghan soil is also remarkably more fertile than the rocky, unirrigated opium fields in the Golden Triangle. The UN estimates in its 2008 report that one hectare of land yielded an average of 14.4 kilograms, or 31.7 pounds, of opium in Myanmar but 48.8 kilograms in Afghanistan.

ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus: Regional MPs to Gambari: Secure public address for Suu Kyi during this visit, at least

Mon 2 Feb 2009

Filed under: News, Press Release

The ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus (AIPMC) strongly encourages the UN Special Envoy to Myanmar Prof. Ibrahim Gambari to meet with Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi during his current visit to Myanmar.

To ensure that the UN mission has tangible outcomes, Prof Gambari's agenda must include a meeting with the Myanmar democracy movement leader followed by an opportunity for her to make a public address, at the very least, while mediating her release.

AIPMC asserts that the UN mission can only be deemed meaningful if Aung San Suu Kyi is allowed her right to speak her views publicly on a wide range of issues on Myanmar, including the UN process.

Prof. Gambari must also meet and discuss key-issues on democracy and human rights with junta leader Senior-General Than Shwe.

Among the dire-issues that need addressing are the detention of political prisoners, the handing down of unprecedented lengthy prison sentences to human rights defenders and the need for a constitutional review

with the participation of all political parties, ethnic group representatives and members of independent civil society organisations.

Further, Prof. Gambari must make it clear that any of the UN's proposals and deals with the military can only be offered when Aung San Suu Kyi and all political prisoners are released immediately and key democratic reforms are adopted.

In recent weeks, there has been an increase of migrants from Myanmar to other ASEAN countries. Prof. Gambari must, during his mission, stress that Myanmar and its neighbouring countries deal with the matter expediently and effectively in the spirit of international conventions and practise.

AIPMC reiterates its commitment to assist the UN in whatever manner necessary to ensure its mission is effective and stresses the need for the Myanmar stalemate to be dealt with in all possible expediency.

The AIPMC is an organisation comprising Parliamentarians from various ASEAN member-states.

For media contact or to facilitate an interview with Parliamentarians, please call: Roshan Jason (AIPMC Executive Director) at +6-012-3750974 or the numbers above.

ASEAN Secretariat: Timor-Leste donates $500,000 for humanitarian aid to Cyclone Nargis survivors in Myanmar

Mon 2 Feb 2009

Filed under: News, Press Release

Timor-Leste last Thursday announced in Dili its donation of US$500,000 for the ASEAN led humanitarian operations to aid the survivors of Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar's Ayeyarwady Delta.

Prime Minister Kay Rala Xanana Gusmao made the announcement during a ceremony in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to launch Timor-Leste's "ASEAN National Secretariat", established to organise and coordinate the country's preparations to join ASEAN.

He said that the contribution is Timor-Leste's show of "solidarity" with the people of Myanmar suffering from Cyclone Nargis. "We in Timor-Leste understand the pains and suffering caused by the cyclone. This modest contribution is also Timor-Leste's show of commitment to supporting the ASEAN Community," he added.

He also said the establishment of Timor-Leste's "ASEAN National Secretariat" is yet another special step towards obtaining the ASEAN membership for his country at the earliest possible date.

President Dr Jose Ramos-Horta, National Parliament President Fernando Lasama de Araujo, Foreign Minister Dr Zacarias Albano da Costa, Secretary General Imron Cotan of Indonesia's Department of Foreign Affairs, and Mr Termsak Chalermpalanupap, Special Assistant to the Secretary-General of ASEAN, among others, were at the ceremony.

Myanmar Opposition Leader Meets UN Envoy

Monday February 02, 2009 15:37:00 EST

(RTTNews) - Myanmar's detained opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi on Monday met with United Nations special envoy Ibrahim Gambari and conveyed her frustration at the UN's failure in securing any pro-democracy reforms in the military-ruled south Asian country, said her party on Monday.

Nyan Win, the spokesman for Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party (NLD), told reporters that Suu Kyi had told Gambari that UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon should not visit Burma until all political prisoners, including herself, were released.

According to Win, Suu Kyi told the UN envoy that "she was ready and willing to meet anyone, but she could not accept having meetings without achieving any outcome". Pointing out the long prison sentences awarded to opposition activists without proper trails, Suu Kyi told Gambari that that rule of law does not exist in Myanmar, he added.

Gambari had arrived in Burma on Saturday to try and revive reconciliation talks between the country's ruling military junta and Suu Kyi's NLD party, and to persuade junta to release all political prisoners.

Myanmar has been under military rule ever since the military prevented Suu Kyi's NLD party from assuming power after winning in the 1989 national elections. Aung San Suu Kyi, a Nobel peace laureate, has been under house arrest ever since.

It is estimated that over 2000 political prisoners still remain in Burmese prisons over their differences with the ruling military regime.

Bridging the Generation Gap

By WAI MOE

Monday, February 2, 2009

E-MAIL
PRINT
TEXT SIZE

Some 5,000 Karens and guests celebrated the 60th anniversary of the founding of the Karen National Union (KNU) on Saturday at its stronghold in Karen State.

Officials said the event served to celebrate Karen culture, to honor the Karen revolution and to act as a bridge between the rebel movement's old guard and the new generation.

Multimedia (View)

The highlight of the festival was the presentation of awards to 16 elderly soldiers to commemorate their 60-year commitment to the Karen revolutionary movement. Among them were KNU Chairman Gen Tamalabaw and Chief of Staff Mu Tu. However, Gen Tamalabaw was unable to attend the ceremony.

"The Karens' struggle for freedom will continue until we accomplish our goal," Commander Mu Tu told the crowd. "We Karen condemn the chauvinist Burman ideology of the military junta and the militarization of Burma."

The KNU was founded to fight for autonomy for the Karen in 1949, a year after Burma had declared independence from Great Britain. The Karen rebels and its military wing, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), were once one of most powerful insurgent groups in the region. However, the rebels were pushed back to the Thai-Burmese border in the 1960s where they set up a headquarters at

Manerplaw on the Moei River across from the Thai border.

In 1995, members of the KNU broke away from the group to form the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), which signed a ceasefire agreement with the Burmese military government. Manerplaw fell to a combined force of DKBA and Burmese army troops soon after.

Since then, the KNLA has been limited to guerilla warfare—mainly hit and run attacks on its enemies from scattered jungle bases. The KNU has lost strategic territory and with it, trade routes to and from Burma and Thailand.

The deputy chairman of the KNU, David Takapaw, told reporters at the ceremony that the Karen rebels will maintain their lines of defense against the Burmese junta and the DKBA.

“In warfare, sometime troops have to retreat. Sometimes they move forward. Therefore, we have to retreat before we take a step forward," he said.

Organizers stressed that the festival was more than just a political ceremony, and was a significant step in unifying Karen in insurgent areas and abroad.

Under a UN resettlement program, thousands of Karen refugees have resettled in Western countries in recent years. Several flew in for the 60th anniversary party.

Saw Eh Htee Kaw, a Karen refugee who was resettled in the UK several years ago, said he had come to the Revolution Day to see relatives, friends and former colleagues.

“I am very happy to be at the ceremony,” he said. “I did not expect thousands of people to be here.”

Zoya Phan, a daughter of the assassinated KNU leader, Mahn Sha, also traveled from London to attend the celebration.

Mahn Sha, the former Karen general secretary, was assassinated by unknown gunmen at his residence in Mae Sot on the Thai-Burmese border on February 14, 2008.

“The military junta has been trying to destroy the Karen and its leaders,” said activist Zoya Phan. “But can they destroy us?”

Mahn Sha's family has formed the Phan Foundation to encourage and support a new generation of Karen community activists who will work to help their people.

The foundation has created the Padoh Mahn Sha Young Leader Award, which on Saturday was presented to a Karen woman activist, Naw Paw K' Bla Htoo, for her outstanding contribution to people in the border areas. She also received a US $2,000 prize with the award.

"I am very happy to receive this award," Naw Paw K' Bla Htoo said. "I will keep up my solid commitment to contribute to the Karen people who definitely need encouragement."

Saw Eh Htee Kaw shared her sentiments. "Although there have been many dilemmas and many disappointments along the 60 years of struggle, I hope to see a new dawn for the Karens in the near future," he said.

Rohingya Face More Hardships at Home, Abroad

By LAWI WENG Monday, February 2, 2009

E-MAIL
PRINT
TEXT SIZE

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) will talk to 66 Rohingya boat people on Tuesday, after a Thai court convicted them of illegally entering the country, a UNHCR spokesperson said on Monday.

The UNHCR was granted access to 12 teenagers from a group of 78 Rohingya detained last week.

Kitty McKinsey, the regional spokeswoman for the UNHCR in Asia, told *The Irrawaddy* on Monday that the UNHCR will meet members of the group to determine if some want to seek political asylum in Thailand.

The Thai-English newspaper *Bangkok Post* reported on Monday that the Thai Defense Ministry permanent secretary Gen Aphichart Penkitti told that the UNHCR and Thailand should devise ways to work together on the Rohingya issue.

The Thai government and the UNHCR might work together to resolve issues of political asylum requests, McKinsey said.

The latest batch of detained Rohingya arrived in Thailand with claims that they were beaten and tortured by the Burmese army after their boat was intercepted at sea by the Burmese navy. Many had wounds on their backs and were treated at a hospital in southern Thailand. Other Rohingyas are believed to have perished at sea.

The Rohingya are a stateless Muslim ethnic minority who face harsh treatment by Burmese authorities. They are prohibited from travelling outside Arakan State and are further marginalized by other discriminatory laws imposed by the military regime.

The Burmese regime maintains that Rohingya are not part of the 100 ethnic groups in Burma.

Last week, a Burmese state-run newspaper, *Myanmar Ahlin*, carried a story that said

it will be complicated if Thailand repatriates Rohingya who did not come from Burma, said the report.

The Rohingya issue has created a heated debate among Burmese inside and outside the country. Many Arakanese people and politicians have voiced similar opinions about the provenance of the Rohingya.

Aye Tha Aung, an ethnic Arakanese and a senior member of the Committee for Representing People's Parliament (CRPP), said the Rohingya are not among the ethnic groups in Burma.

"How could they claim that they came from Burma when in fact they come from Bangladesh," the Arakanese politician told *The Irrawaddy*.

Many Burmese proudly claim that Arakan State serves as a wall to prevent an influx of Rohingya and Bangladeshi from migrating deeper inside Burma. Burmese military forces usually push back Rohingya refugees, and there have been reports of indiscriminate killings and human rights violations taking place along the border with Bangladesh.

The regime usually wins the hearts and minds of people in Arakan State whenever they crackdown on Rohingya.

According to Thailand's English-language daily, *Bangkok Post*, 4,880 Rohingya were arrested last year for illegally entering Thailand and 90 percent are still waiting to be repatriated.

A rising tide of Rohingya refugees has been fleeing Burma to the neighboring countries of Indonesia, Malaysia and India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Their numbers usually increase after November, when the seas are at their calmest. One hundred Rohingya illegal migrants recently were arrested by Indonesian authorities in Aceh.

Many seek to escape the economic hardship of their restricted lives and turn to brokers to help them find work outside Arakan State.

The World Food Program reported last year that the area faces food shortages. The condition has forced hundreds of Rohingya to depart on the sea in leaky vessels and head for Malaysia, but many end up on Thailand beaches or drown in the stormy waters of the Andaman Sea.

UN Envoy Meets with Detained Burmese Opposition Leader

By Daniel Schearf
Bangkok
02 February 2009

The United Nations' special envoy on Burma has met with detained Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, to discuss political reform in the military-run country. But it is not clear if the military's top leader will grant him a similar meeting.

The U.N. envoy on Burma, Ibrahim Gambari, met for more than an hour Monday with Aung San Suu Kyi and other opposition leaders at the state guest house.

Aung San Suu Kyi was allowed to leave her villa compound, where Burma's military-led government has kept her under house arrest for most of the last 18 years.

"Certainly that he's been able to meet her this time is, in itself, very significant. But, of course, we don't know what was discussed," said Aye Win, a U.N. spokesman based in Burma.

The meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi is a step forward, compared to the envoy's last visit in August. During that visit, she declined to meet the envoy after he was refused a meeting with Burma's top military leader, General Than Shwe.

It is not clear if General Shwe will meet with Gambari during his four-day visit, which ends Tuesday.

Shortly after the meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi, a spokesman for her National League for Democracy party called for the release of political prisoners.

Human rights organizations say there are more than 2,000 political prisoners in Burma.

Gambari is in Burma to encourage the release of political prisoners and implementation of political reform.

The military government says it will hold multi-party elections in 2010, as part of its "road map to democracy." But the generals have already written a new constitution that will ensure the military stays in power.

Thailand-based political analyst Win Min says the military leaders have shown no concessions.

"I doubt it will be a free and fair election, given the restrictions, and the regressions the military has been doing," Min said. "So, I doubt there will be free and fair elections, if the situation continues like this."

The military has ruled Burma since 1962, crushing any opposition.

The military leaders allowed an election in 1990 that Aung SanSuu Kyi's party won by a landslide. The military then refused to honor the results, imprisoned opposition leaders and placed Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest.

Japan helps Myanmar with agricultural restoration after storm

The Japanese government has provided Myanmar with 2 million U.S. dollars through the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) to help in agricultural restoration work in the country's Ayeyawaddy delta after storm, the local Weekly Eleven reported Monday.

Under an agreement between the two countries on the aid signed by Japanese ambassador to Myanmar Yasuaki Nogawa and Myanmar Minister of Agriculture and Irrigation, agro-based living and food security will be re-established, the report said, quoting the Japanese Embassy.

Meanwhile, the European Union (EU) will also give Myanmar humanitarian assistance of 40.5 million euros (52 million USD) this year, according to earlier report..

Of the total, 22 million euros will be spent for those who had suffered disastrous cyclone Nargis last year, while the rest 18.5 million euros will be used for people who have difficulties with their living.

Another Malaysian humanitarian organization, the Mercy Malaysia, will also provide help to rebuild a dozen healthcare facilities in Dedaye, one of Myanmar's cyclone-hit areas in the Ayeyawaddy delta, earlier reports said.

Deadly tropical cyclone Nargis hit five divisions and states - Ayeyawaddy, Yangon, Bago, Mon and Kayin on May 2 and 3 last year, of which Ayeyawaddy and Yangon inflicted the heaviest casualties and massive infrastructural damage.

The storm has killed 84,537 people, leaving 53,836 missing and 19,359 injured according to official death toll.

Truth about delaying 2010 elections

by Moe Thu and Htet Win

Monday, 02 February 2009 15:46

A general election proposed by the military government to be held in 2010 is likely to put off, not because of some reasons it has come up with, but because of its motive to prolong staying in power, according to sources close to regime.

"A government minister hinted about the junta's continuation in power for 10 more years in the late 1990s, and it turned out to be true," said a long-time Burma watcher. "Besides, army officers can't whimsically say those things about delayed elections, as they must have been instructed along this line from above," he added.

There was last Thursday a media report carried by Thailand based Shan Herald, quoting informed sources as saying that a high ranking military officer said the proposed 2010 elections could be put off for several reasons including the fact -- disruptive activities by dissidents both inside and outside the country .

Lieutenant-Colonel Tin Maung Shwe, the military commander in southern Shan State did not elaborate. Referring to the government's consecutive inability to unearth culprits in several recent bombings in the commercial city Rangoon, a local business writer said the military government was mostly believed to create such disruptive activities, while continuously blaming political opponents inside and outside the country.

"The government usually blames them, but never comes up with any evidence," the Yangon-based writer said, adding that the junta was itself creating an unstable situation in Burma for the sake of military power.

Another informed source based in Naypyitaw said the military government conducted a training programme to produce several dozens of instigators.

"Probably, it is under a unit with the Ministry of Home Affairs," the source said.

"Using such instigators, the military government has planned to spark communal riots between Bamar and local Indian community (known as Kular) in a couple of months, a means the Burmese military government uses to divert the general public's political/development attention," the source said.

Whatever means [it] would be used in order to postpone any elections as long as the process favours the army, the sources said.

The military government's motive is to stay in power.

"Military-dominant governments so far -- Burma Socialist Programme Party and State Peace and Development Council -- would have reformed the country's leadership, if they really loved the country," said a young Burmese academic.

"They continue to create just a show-off area of development, but the people will continue to suffer. The haves will have more. The have-nots will lose more," he said.

He said the poor would not only be materially impoverished but also intellectually. The poor may only get a few trickle-down benefits. Aides and investments may finally flow in, but Burma will remain a sweat shop with little respect for human rights, labour rights, and political dissent, "

That is the way any military government has tried to tone down the general public's urge for a democratic leadership, a change in high demand in Burma.

Another thing that bars the change from taking place is that the government's ambivalence to include what kinds of representatives in a future parliament.

Major General Htay Oo, the Secretary General of the Union Solidarity and Development Association, whose patron is the Sr. Gen Than Shwe, the head of the junta, is said to be upset with the lack of reliable civilian partners in the future parliament.

And the Third Force that is referred to individuals inside Burma, who are seeking their own ways to a democracy, argues that the army needs civilian collaborators to make changes. They argue that those military-turned-civilians will need civilian partners who are willing to cooperate. Corporation of the moderate people from both sides will solve out the dilemma in evolution but to accept the junta road mp. However, they admit that there is still risk and the every decision is now only from Than Shwe.

Meanwhile, the army does not trust veteran politicians that pursue conventional ways forward. Some of the veteran politicians are those in the scene in the late 1940s.

Regarding one of the four reasons that could delay the coming elections -- tension with Bangladesh over gas exploration, the Rangoon-based writer said it was just an excuse.

"It is a routine between or among countries, which most countries work out through a pragmatic approach, taking time," he said, adding that the two countries' maritime dispute need not be an issue to postpone the elections.

Another person, familiar with the relation between the two countries, said Burma was on the right side for most border and immigrant issues.

"However, Burma has political and/or image problems in the international arena, and its neighbour Bangladesh is intent on exploiting the situation," he said.

He said Rohingya were no less a problem for Bangladesh than Burma, and Bangladeshis had also mistreated them. And both countries are yet to identify how many and which Rohingya are from either. Some are Bengali economic refugees.

The other two reasons the military government has made up are: Incomplete census and problems in the drug eradication programme.

For those, the military government refuses time and again more assistance from the international community, who is willing to offer so.

Another reason, cease-fire ethnic groups, particularly Wa and Kachin are refusing to surrender arms and only later announced their agreement on the 2010 election plan.

United State Wa Army or UWSA is the armed wing of United State Party with an estimated 20,000 soldiers. Wa started mentioning "Wa State Government Special Region" in their official papers amidst the Burmese government wanting them to continue as " Shan State Special Region 2".

Kachin Independence Organization itself will not take part in elections but there will be a political party of the Kachin state at least to contest in the elections.

Pa Os have not made an official statement in 2010.

However, Aung Kham Hti of Pa O gets on well with the regime. He is even one of the patrons of USDA Southern Shan State. His group is called PaO National Army (PNA).

Meanwhile, some more major nationalities including Chin, Mon and Shan are yet to be organised to come along with the junta's political road map.

Regarding the Shan front, the junta in 1990s begun exercising a divide-and-rule approach on Shan state.

"The military government has favoured Pa Os population at the detriment of the Shans in areas like Taunggyi, the capital of the Shan stae," the long-time watcher said.

He said there was Pa O-Shan rivalry in southern Shan state, adding that Pa Os, except red Pa O that borders the Karenni State, never got on well with the Shans.

It is head of state Than Shwe's hypocritical announcement that Burma is building a modernised nation based on national unity.

The process of the elections laws should have been made by now, in order to allow political parties to be prepared.

There was talk in circles close to the military government around last August that election laws would have been prescribed by the end of last year. So far it is yet to be done.

Whatever reasons the junta is coming up with, it is found failing to take up a workable option, which must include all stake-holders such as the political opposition groups, cease-fire groups and civilians. That way, many more problems are in front

awaiting the military elite and the 55-million-population of the country.

Next >

Myanmar punishes 277 people for drug offense in December

Myanmar punished 277 people, including 67 women, for drug offense in December last year, according to the monthly figures released by anti-drug authorities Sunday.

During the month, the authorities seized 50 kilograms (kg) of opium, 2.32 kg heroin as well as 120,000 stimulant tablets, the figures of the Central Committee for Drug Abuse Control show.

In the previous month, the country exposed a total of 207 narcotic-drug-related cases, punishing 308 people including 58 women.

That month's seizure included seized 71.18 kilograms (kg) of opium, 7.6 kg of heroin, 7 kg of ephedrine, 9 kg of marijuana, 2.5 kg of Ice and 5.9 kg of Caffeine as well as 221,406 stimulant tablets.

Other figures indicate that in the 2007-08 poppy cultivation season, 4,821 hectares of poppy plantations in the country were destroyed, preventing the production of 52.39 tons of opium.

According to the Home Ministry, the opium cultivation in Myanmar dramatically decreased from 140,000 hectares to 27,700 hectares in a decade ending 2007.

The number of drug users in Myanmar had also decreased from 61,455 in 2005 to 54,709 in January 2008, it said.

Myanmar has been implementing a 15-year plan (1999-2014) to totally eradicate poppy in three phases, each running for five years.

BHUTAN:

Hazelnuts to help farmers

- Bhutanese farmers who thought that degraded lands from deforestation, irresponsible shifting cultivation and over grazing was of little use to them, may be in a for a pleasant surprise.

Those lands will now be used to produce hazelnuts of premium export quality.

This will be done through a public-private partnership venture, between Bhutan and the investing company, the Sage Partners Limited.

The first phase of the memorandum of understanding was signed yesterday between the agriculture minister lyonpo Dr Pema Gyamtsho and the managing partner of Sage Partners Limited Daniel K Spitzer.

“Rural subsistence farmers are facing many challenges economically and socially. This is an opportunity to give them income generation opportunity where they can stay in their homes and actually rehabilitate some of the degraded environment in their area,” said Daniel K Spitzer.

The first phase of the project will start in Radi, Phongmey with the plantation of about 300,000 plantlets, said the program director for the renewable natural resources research centre (RNRRC) for east Tayan Raj Gurung. “The first consignment of plantlets will reach Bhutan in May this year and the plantation will begin by March 2010.”

In the west, the identified areas for hazelnut production are Wangdephodrang, Punakha, Paro and Haa.

The nation wide project will be carried out on about 20, 000 hectors of degraded land all over the country. Lyonpo Dr Pema Gyamtsho said that this venture has both economical and ecological benefits.

But the US$30 million project comes with challenges. “The scale of this project is larger than any investment in this sector in this country. We are talking about the complex system of logistics and outreach, about having to teach farmers on how to plant an entirely new different kind of trees. So

that's a challenge," said Daniel K Spitzer. "It's a great opportunity to penetrate international market and to create a positioning of Bhutan as a producer of premium quality food product."

Tayan R Gurung said that there is a need for public awareness about hazelnut production. "We have to teach them and even show them how the nut looks like."

Hazelnut is a new crop to the farmers in Bhutan. According to RNRRC officials, it requires a temperature between 8-25 degree Celsius and grows at an altitude between 1600-2600 meters.

Daniel K Spitzer said that His Majesty the fourth king inspired the project coming to Bhutan in a large part. "I wanted to do something for Bhutan for a long time. Yes, this is a commercial venture and it's a practicle venture as a partnership between public and private, but it's also very much an altruistic venture."

Talks decide to Strengthen Security

The government of West Bengal state, India and Bhutan will identify vulnerable entry and exit points and provide extra vigilance in view of the infiltration by the Indian insurgent groups and the Communist Party of Bhutan.

This was decided during the 19th border districts coordination meeting held in Thimphu earlier this week. The officer in charge along the Indo-Bhutan border towns would strictly access these points and strengthen the security.

Officials from Bhutan lead by the head of the Law and Order Bureau under the home ministry, Karma T Namgyal, and seven high level officials from India lead by Jalpaiguri Division Commissioner B.L Meena attended the two-day meeting at hotel Druk.

Police Inspector General of North Bengal region, Mr Kundanlal Tamta, told Kuensel that 10,000 youth known as the Youth Communist League from the camps in Nepal has been a threat to India as well as Bhutan causing disturbance from time to time. He said that the youth were trained by Bhutan Tiger Force.

Mr Kundanlal said that the 197 kilometres long North Bengal and Bhutan border is guarded by 37 border outpost Sima Sewa Bal (SSB) working hard to stop the infiltration of militants. "We have to safe guard both the Indo-Bhutan border as well as the Indo-Nepal border," he said.

With the new government in Bangladesh indicating non-tolerance of any militant activities in their country, the Indian government had cautioned that these militants in Bangladesh might infiltrate in to India and Bhutanese territories because of the open and porous nature of the border between the two countries. The government has agreed to put in action all possible efforts to prevent the infiltration.

Both governments also agreed to form a sub-committee comprising of dzongdas and police superintendent (SP) of Samtse and Chukha, dungpas of Lhamoizingkha and Phuentsholing, and officer in charge of Dagana police from the Bhutanese side and the North Bengal police's Inspector General, District Magistrates and police superintendent of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri.

The committee would hold periodic meetings to view the perceptions of threat from the militants. The Bhutanese high officials assured that Bhutan would never allow Indian insurgent groups to carry out activities that are of disturbance to the Indian interest.

Both governments also decided to hand over national offenders who had crossed the border after committing crime. "The officer in charge at the border towns will have full authority to informally hand over the criminals to their respective nations," said Mr Kundanlal adding that past formalities took time.

The meeting also discussed identification of new entry and exit gate between Phuentsholing and Jaigaon, exchange of information on fake currency operators of the two countries, review of progress on mitigation of adverse affect of dolomite mining and, poaching/smuggling of forest products by Indian and Bhutanese collaborations and illicit felling of trees and their removal on either side.

NPPF pays record benefits in 07-08

Mass retirement in armed force shoots up pension benefit amount

The National Pension and Provident Fund (NPPF) had paid the highest pension and provident benefits in 2007-2008 since its inception in six years ago.

The fund paid about Nu 151million in pension and provident fund benefits to 2,835 retirees of which Nu 39.48 million was paid to armed force PF beneficiaries alone. Pension benefits amounted to Nu 44.15 million in the same year.

According to NPPF's annual report, the number of retirees and pensioners increased in 2007-2008 which led to the increase in the benefit amount.

"The government's policy to reduce the strength of the armed force and civil servants and corporation employees who quit to join politics in 2007 increased retirees and pensioners," stated the report.

The scheme is available to civil servants including government corporations and the armed force.

Civil pension

By 2008, pension member has reached 26,050 members compared with 15,157 in 2002. The pension fund has also grown to Nu 2,755 million as of June 2008 compared to Nu 1,165 in 2002. The increase was attributed to the increase in members especially after employees of Druk Holding and Investment, Druk Green Power Corporation and Dagachu project joined the pension plan.

NPPF had paid Nu 19.12 million as pension to 597 beneficiaries, which comprised of 210 pensioners, 17 surviving spouse, 352 children, 12 orphans and five permanently disabled members.

According to the report, payment increased by 84 percent compared to 2006-2007 where only 10.37 million was paid.

Armed force pension

The armed force pension financed 1,155 retiree who were paid Nu 25.03 million. Although a member who had served more than 10 years are paid the pension in monthly installments, the government designed a special one-time Kidu programme where even members who served more than 10 years were paid lump-sum benefits until December 2007.

Out of the 497 retirees, 277 served more than 10 years while 220 were less than 10 years. Under the kidu scheme, out of 277 retirees, 150 opted for monthly pension while 127 went for lump-sum.

Given the retirement age of 45 in the armed force, members were retiring at an increasing rate, according to the report. As of June 2008, there were 1,155 pensioners out of which 518 were normal pensioners (complete 45 yrs), 200 received early pension, 143 were spouses, 280 children, 12 orphan, and two dependent parent.

Provident Fund

NPPF paid about Nu 107 million to 1,203 retirees in 2007-2008. Provident fund is paid in lump-sum amount to the retirees on superannuation and the nominees in case of their death. Each member is allotted a specific account in which contributions (6 percent) and interests eared are credited annually. Accumulated cont and interests earned are paid in lump-sum on member's retirement.

As of June 2008, the plan covered 38,210 members comprising of civil service, government corporations, and the armed force. 2,086 new members joined the scheme in 2007-08.

The pension benefit payments are outsourced to Bank of Bhutan and the Bhutan Post to facilitate quick delivery. A pension officer said that NPPF is identifying members nearing retirement age to educate them on the working of the NPPF to help NPPF provide fast and efficient service.

Meanwhile, NPPF, the third largest institutional investor in the country has recorded a 6.5 percent return rate on its investments.

NPPF pays record benefits in 07-08

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Voluntary contribution to parties increased [2009-02-02]

The Election Commission has raised the volunteer contribution to the political parties by 500 percent -- up from Nu 100,000 to Nu 500,000, a notice by the commission said.

According to a notice that an EC official mailed to Bhutan News Service, the commission has decided to raise the maximum ceiling for voluntary contribution by individual per year from the date of registration of every Political Party.

The new ceiling for voluntary contribution will also apply to any new political party from the date of its registration, which looks impossible for now. The commission has also allowed the parties to review their membership fees.

This is modification to the commission's notice issued on February 12, 2008. The effective time period for the existing two Political Parties will be applied from the date of their registration i.e. September 1 and October 2 2007 for PDP and DPT respectively.

Notice further says, the scrutiny and audit of the accounts of Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) and People's Democratic Party (PDP) up to end June 2008 and Election Returns pertaining to the first Parliamentary Elections, as well as their review by the Election Commission have been completed.

Political parties are given extended date up to end February 2009 to confirm and verify the names of the members as both parties were found guilty of contravening Section 76 of the Public Election Fund Act as they have accepted contributions without confirming the voters against registration in the Electoral Roll. It has also directed the parties to clear all financial liabilities within the next four financial years i.e. by 30 June 2012 while being required not to incur any more dues to non-permissible sources.

It asked PDP to pay and produce, at the earliest, the receipt from tax authorities for the Tax Deducted at Source, which the party has not done for the Statutory Deductions (TDS/ HC) and Provident Fund totaling a sum of Nu. 1,11,785.57. Further, the party is asked to adjust the outstanding advances made to its Dzongkhag offices before end February.

The parties are also told to submit proof of transfer of the ownership of the vehicles purchased by them in the names of the respective parties not later than end February.

The commission said the decision are taken in due recognition of the fact that the political parties crucial to democracy are being formed for the first time; the familiarization tours, although unforeseen was necessary; fixed assets form more than 10 percent of total audited expenditures of the parties; State financing shall not be forthcoming under any circumstance; Parties must be held

responsible for paying off their debts and liabilities; and there is need to strengthen the financial capacity of the two existing parties while motivating the formation of new ones.

Bhutan receives 141 power tillers

Bhutan received 141 sets of new power tillers on January 30, along with accessories and spare parts from the Japanese government under the KR-II grant.

The new sets of power tillers would be distributed to all 20 dzongkhags once the committee looks at the requirements and the order placed by the people.

Yesterday, the First Secretary, Embassy of Japan, Mr. Hisaahi Sakata handed over the new sets of power tillers to the agriculture minister, Lyonpo Dr Pema Gyamtsho.

Lyonpo addressed that the grants have given Bhutanese farmers valuable opportunities to enjoy farming by using the best and the most suitable farm machines available in the world. He also said that there was no future for Bhutanese farming without mechanisation. “The grant has become crucial in bonding the trust between the government and the people and has never been more valid and crucial than now,” said the minister at the signing.

Mr Sakata said that among many countries who received similar grants Bhutan was one who had managed the equipments in a systematic way and utilised the machines properly. He also said that he was happy to see Bhutanese farmers develop by this new technique and farming method.

The cost of a power tiller in Japan is about Nu 4,00,000 but it is sold to Bhutan at a subsidized rate, at Nu 120,000 a set. With growing demand, Bhutanese farmer bought the power tiller in a group. One group comprised five households. Most of them bought the machines through loan.

The programme director of Agriculture Machinery Center(AMC), Cheten Wangchen said that the new power tillers would help solve the problem of labour shortage.

The KR-II grant started in 1967 when the Kennedy Round Table conference was conducted promising to help poor countries by providing food.The following year the Japan Government formulated a new grant scheme and started providing assistance to increase food production and since then the grant came to be known as KR grant.

Land Commission in dilemma

The National Land Commission, established in 2007 to expedite land transactions and improve

service delivery, is yet to make an impact in sorting out people's long-standing land problems.

About 50 to 100 people visit the commission's secretariat in Thimphu everyday hoping to sort out their land transactions and other issues, and sometimes, to request officials to speed up the process. Some are bothered by the delay and bureaucratic procedures of land transaction while some are still waiting to see progress in the system.

On the other hand, land commission officials are also bogged down with the accumulating backlog cases, delay in routine land transactions from all 20 dzongkhags and the urban areas, and the pressure to meet the deadline in completing the national re-cadastral survey.

"Our mandate and workload has increased without a proportional increase in infrastructure, manpower and other requisites in strengthening the commission," said the secretary of land commission, Sangay Khandu.

"Land transactions are getting stuck because the workload is increasing and the staff are not able to keep up with the demand. We have only one land officer in each region."

This week alone, the deputy chief of rural land register received more than 200 applications for transactions and about 50 people came to see him personally to solve their matters. He has 11 officials to deal with the rural land cases.

The Land Act of 1979 was revised during the 87th National Assembly session in 2007 after which the land commission was set up. The commission took over the issue of Lag thram, which the judiciary used to handle.

To implement the revised Act, the commission also set a deadline of December 31, 2007 to clear all land transactions done in accordance with the Land Act of 1979. From about 12,000 backlog cases, the officials said that the number was brought down to about 2,000 in January 2008. But today, the commission is yet to resolve 1,000 pending cases and the cases are still "accumulating", according to commission officials.

Urban land record, which was handled by the City Corporation, also came under the commission, along with a host of problems. "There has been no systematic thram or plot records and there is no proper documentation," said a land commission official.

A frustrated landowner in Thimphu said that he was tired of commuting between the City office and the land commission secretariat to get his job done. "Land prices change within weeks and delayed processing of ownership created problems between buyers and sellers," he said.

The land commission's priority, however, has been to complete the national re-cadastral survey using the most recent technology by 2010. The national survey is expected to reduce the routine transactions, land disputes and disagreement and cases of family inheritance, according to land officials.

But so far, the commission had completed its survey in Lhuentse dzongkhag alone. Land commission projected about 45 survey teams to complete the re-cadastral survey on time but it has only 19 people doing the detailed survey. "If we are not able to accelerate and increase the number of teams, completing the survey in three years would be impossible," said the secretary adding that the Royal Civil Service Commission, with its policy of zero growth to bureaucracy, did not grant the commission additional staff.

Meanwhile, Bhutanese continue to demand better and faster services from the land commission but land commission is in a dilemma. Their hands are full.

Next change: Corporate salary hike

the pay hike fixed for around 18,000 civil servants the Ministry of Finance (Mof) will be soon fixing guidelines for a pay hike for around 6,000 corporate employees and around 4,000 police personnel.

“The Finance Minister will soon announce and give directives on how and in what manner the corporate salaries will be revised,” said Lyonchhoen Jigmi Y Thinley. The Prime Minister said that the Pay Commission could not work out any recommendations on the Royal Bhutan Police and the corporate sector.

“One sector affects the other while some difference must be maintained there must be some kind of rationale,” said the Prime Minister.

In the meantime, after the civil servant pay hike, there is an increasing pressure from corporate employees on their management to give them a hike as well.

Yesterday, Managing Directors (MD) of various DHI linked companies raised the need for a pay hike for their respective corporations in a DHI meeting held in Phuentsholing.

DHI and other corporations unanimously voiced that a pay hike was urgently needed for their staff to keep up morale, productivity and tackle inflation.

Druk Green Power Corporation MD Chewang Rinzin said, “We raised the issue of a pay hike for our employees with the DHI management and informed them of an earlier MoF rule in which corporate employees are paid around 15 percent higher salary than civil servants.” He said the hike was needed to keep that parity. “Civil servants have job security and other benefits which corporate staff don’t enjoy and they have to keep producing.”

Bhutan Power Corporation MD Bharat Tamang said, “ DHI has said that it will look into a revision .”

DHI’s chief executive officer, Karma Yonten said, “We will wait for the MoF as to what sort of directives it will give to corporations directly under it.” He said though DHI was autonomous and it could set guidelines for any salary hike, there was no hurry.

He however made it clear the any hike consideration would only be for the corporate employees of the corporations since everyone in DHI were already bound by contracts.

Apart from DHI, the Bhutan National Bank is considering a 35 percent hike. The MD Kipchu Tshering said, “A hike was necessary to have good manpower and remain ahead since low pay would mean getting only low caliber people in the corporate sector.” He said the company had made Nu 300 million in profits and could afford a hike.

BDFC MD Ngawang Gyeltshen said, “We have a lot of social service obligations like rural credit which we subsidize from our profits and our staff will be obviously demoralised if there is no hike.” MDs of Bhutan Post and FCB said that they are considering a hike since the civil servants were given a hike.

“If we don’t give a hike respecting the original baseline then corporations will start loosing people which could make it difficult to fulfill the mandates given by the government,” said DGPC’s MD Chewang Rinzin.

Home vs GNHC over local govt.?

- The Local Government (LG) has become the recent bone of contention with both the Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC) and Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs (MOHCA) claiming that they are in-charge of dealing with the LG.

The confusion cropped up after a LG department was recently created in the home ministry, while the GNHC already has a division looking after LG development which was transferred to them from the home ministry during the interim government period.

This confusion was further exacerbated with the vague nature of a cabinet directive creating the Department of Local Governance in the MOHCA but not clearly specifying it’s duties and powers or distinguishing it from to the GNHC’s own Local Government division.

The under-current here is that the DPT government is not comfortable with its planning agency having any executive functions. However, the so far the muddy waters has allowed some constructive debate between the two agencies.

“We have received no formal orders and everything is as it was”, said GNHC Secretary Karma Tshiteem. “The GNHC’s interest is in planning and not implementing and now that the Constitution calls for an apolitical local government, our Geog Administrative Officer (GAO) is only a planning officer,” he said. “With an apolitical LG it is really under no one so we have to create structures that suite the new situation.”

He said that in the past there were coordination and planning issues with the LG. “Now if there is any weakness in the LG , we should be held accountable.” He said that GNHC’s role was to plan, allocate resources, coordinate and help in the capacity building of the LG.

On the status of GAOs he said “there is no directives on the GAO’s and the re-establishment of the DLG under home ministry has not touched that.”

He said that since planning was under GNHC, the GAO’s were planning officers who needed to coordinate with the commission on the LG plans. “The GNHC is chaired by the Prime Minister and we are a part of the government and will follow what they say,” he clarified.

An observer said that while the GNHC see the need of GAO’s to help efficiently execute, coordinate and monitor the plans made by the LG the home ministry saw a need to have someone for better coordination on issues like legal matters, law and order and administration.

Lyonchhoen Jigmi Y Thinley explaining the re-establishment of DLG said, “We have decentralised the local government but that does not mean we abandon them since their capacity especially that of gewogs are very low at this time.”

He said that the gewog administration had powers but was inadequate in its capacity and needed to be monitored. He said that the people could not be abandoned to an administration yet to develop capacity.

“The planning commission is exactly that as it is a planning and policy making body for the entire government and not an executive body,” said the Lyonchhoen. The Prime Minister said under the command of His Majesty the Fourth King, he himself was in charge of the first phase of decentralization but that he was not able to give enough support leading to several Dzongdas loosing their jobs.

The Prime Minister said that the entire government structure would be reviewed in which the RCSC would play an important role.

Home minister Lyonpo Minjur Dorji said. “the new DLG will mean that whole stock of LG functions under GNHC will be transferred.” He said that it was difficult otherwise to coordinate activities like law and order for all 20 dzongkhags.

He said that the GAOs would be under MOHCA but there would be a mechanism to report to GNHC with planning officers already present at the dzongkhag level.

Fuel price drops again

With a litre of petrol now costing Nu 38.53 and diesel Nu 30.97 in Thimphu, Bhutanese are paying the lowest price for fuel since January 2005.

The Department of Trade (DoT), ministry of economic affairs announced the new price of petrol and diesel in the country after the fuel rates dropped in India on Wednesday.

Similarly, the rates have dropped by Nu 4.43 for petrol and Nu 1.89 for diesel for the eastern dzongkhangs. For Central Bhutan, the price for petrol has dropped by Nu 4.43 and Nu 1.87 for diesel.

Along with the petrol and diesel, the price for liquid petroleum gas (LPG) also dropped. LPG for western districts will now cost Nu 387.24 instead of Nu 417.80. In the central region LPG will now cost Nu 391.83 instead of Nu 411.95. In east Bhutan, the price has gone down from Nu 437.40 to Nu 418.50.

An official from the petroleum oil lubricants (POL) division of the trade department said that the import of petroleum products have decreased by three percent in 2008. “This was because of the decrease in SKO (kerosene) import and the reason could also be due to more electrification,” said Cheki Tshewang.

The officiating director of DoT, Dophu Tshering said that it was the first time that the price has been reduced twice within a short period of time. “The reduction would have a gradual impact on the business centre and would be a good news to the public.”

He said that it would be a huge relief to the housewives, besides the taxi drivers, truckers, bus drivers and others. In 2008, Bhutan imported petroleum products (lubricants, petrol, diesel, LPG) worth Nu 2,771.63 million. Bhutan imported 57,245 kilolitres of diesel and 17,393 kilolitres of petrol in 2008.

What is the purpose of offering butter lamps at a lhakhang? Wouldn't it be better to offer money to a poor person?

Actually, making offerings to the poor is something all Buddhists should undertake. Compassion is at the heart of Buddhist practice. In this regard, it is said: 'All the suffering in the world comes from wishing ourselves to be happy, while all the joy in the world comes from wishing others to be happy.' While people will generally approve of this statement, most will not take it too literally. However, when we investigate the root of suffering, it makes total sense.

The cause of selfishness is our mistaken view of phenomena and self. We see it as something solid and permanent and then cling to this mistaken view. This sounds complicated, but in reality it is not. Think of a piece of paper. If analysed, we will not find anything that can actually be called 'paper'. It is just processed wood, which came from a tree that developed from a seed through interaction with moisture, sunlight and nutrition. Basically, it is a temporary amalgamation of elements that are conveniently labelled as paper. Everything we experience is the same, including our own body.

So, how is this understanding linked to generosity? Well, thinking of everything as clearly separate creates dichotomies, such as I and the outside world. When this occurs, people naturally try to protect this 'separate' self. They create a prison-like castle, where the supposed outer world is viewed as either threatening or desirable. The castle becomes a source of aggression.

Generosity, on the other hand, requires a certain degree of surrender of the self and is in tune with the understanding that all things are connected. Consequently, when we commit ourselves to others, we are chipping away at ego's fortress. We are ending our isolation. The two hands that once gazed at each other with suspicion begin to recognize that they are part of the same body. Preserving the idea of separation, on the other hand, intensifies a selfish attitude and each lie or corrupt act is another stone added to our prison walls.

OK, so it is clear that compassion undermines the ego and severs the root of selfishness, but why offer butter lamps instead of giving to the poor? Well, all action begins in the mind, and offering butter lamps is as an excellent means to ensure the mind's purity. It is like enriching the soil before planting a crop. However, for the act to function in a positive way it is essential to offer a butter lamp with sincere aspirations that it will benefit others.

Of course, giving to a beggar can also transform our mind. However, the opportunity to do so in a way that purifies the mind may not present itself often, whereas offering such items as butter lamps, incense and bowls of water can be developed as a daily spiritual practice. This is particular powerful when we adopt visualization techniques to transform the benefactors of the offering into Buddhas or gurus and to transform and multiply the offerings. Without such prior purification of the mind, seemingly positive acts, like helping the poor, are often tainted by expectations. We may not desire a gross reward, but we may seek personal gratification. In this way, the needs of the giver over shadow those of the receiver. This can lead to jealousy, resentment and feelings of superiority. As the yogi Shabkha said, "Without compassion a man can smile even as he kills."

Perhaps the best solution is to both offer to the poor and adopt spiritual practices that help develop a generous mind, such as offering butter lamps. The two gestures are complimentary, not contradictory.

PM shares dream with his voters [2009-01-31]

Thimphu, January 31: The Prime Minister Jigmi Thinley, during his first visit to his constituency after the elections, was asked to address the problems of the local people.

In Shumar geog on Thursday he asked the local people to forget the past wounds and be united for the development of the country, besides thanking them for successful transition of the country to democracy.

He repeated his government's commitments to connect all 205 geogs in the country by road network and providing drinking water and electricity at the earliest possible.

Further, he said government wish to establish primary schools in every village not longer than one hour-walking distance and improve telecommunication facilites.

His other promises include two ambulances with three doctors for each hospitals in the country, reducing unemployment rate to as low as 2.5 percent and construct airports in Bumthang, Trashigang and Gelephu to connect with international community.

Govt limits ad expenditure at 2pc [2009-01-28]

Gelephu, January 28: The new regulation by the government could hamper the business sector in the country from growing as it limits the private firms not to spend more than 2 percent of their gross income on advertising.

The private companies express worry that this would degrade the competitive power of the market as county moves ahead with open market policies.

The government strategy is aimed at increasing revenue generation because the rule says, government has to deduct the amount spent on advertising when companies submit their account for tax payment.

Business and Politics in Muslim World

India

Sadia Khanum

24th January 2009 to 30th January 2009

Presentation date: 4th February 2009

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- Petition seeks provision for negative voting
- Congress not for pre-poll alliance at national level
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Political front:

BJP finalises candidates for 16 Lok Sabha seats

The Bharatiya Janata Party's Central Election Committee finalised a list of 16 party candidates 12 for seats from Uttar Pradesh, 3 from Kerala, and one from Daman and Diu. On November 11, the BJP had declared 11 candidates for U.P. constituencies. However, only 10 candidates remain as Kalyan Singh who was finalised for the Etah seat has since resigned from the party. The big names finalised for U.P. then included Rajnath Singh from Ghaziabad and Murli Manohar Joshi from Varanasi. Maneka Gandhi was also finalised to contest from Anwla while her son Varun Gandhi was decided as the party candidate from Pilibhit, the seat won by his mother in 2004.

Petition seeks provision for negative voting

The Supreme Court is hearing a petition seeking a direction to the Centre and the Election Commission to have a provision for "negative" voting in the Representation of the People Act, giving the voter the right to register his "rejection" of the candidates. A Bench of Justice B.N. Agrawal and Justice G. S. Singhvi on Wednesday heard arguments from senior counsel Rajinder Sachar for the petitioner, People's Union of Civil Liberties (PUCL), for such a direction and Additional Solicitor-General Amarendra Saran, appearing for the Centre, strongly opposing it. Counsel for the Election Commission will make her submission on Thursday. Mr. Sachar pointed out that under Rule 49 O of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, a voter who wanted to exercise the right not to vote had to inform the returning officer, who would register his name and address in an election book, thus violating the code of secret ballot. He said the Commission should make a specific provision in the EVM to enable the voter to choose 'None of the Above' (NOTA) option. The Rule says: "Elector deciding not to vote. — If an elector, after his electoral roll number has been duly entered in the register of voters in Form 17A and has put his signature or thumb impression thereon as required under sub-rule (1) of rule 49L, decided not to record his vote, a remark to this effect shall be made against the said entry in Form 17A by the presiding officer and the signature or thumb impression of the elector shall be obtained against such remark."Mr. Sachar argued that the rule is ultra vires the Constitution and violated Article 19 1 (a) on freedom of speech and expression. He said Article 324 gave ample power to the Election Commission to fill the lacuna. Mr. Saran argued that the expression 'voting' would not include abstaining from voting or non-voting. There was no need to maintain secrecy in the case of abstaining from voting or non-voting under Section 128 of the RP Act and Rule 49 O was intra vires the Constitution. In its response, the Centre said "the suggestion of a negative or 'NOTA' vote does make a lot of sense intellectually and as a matter of principle. It may, however, not at all be a practicable proposition as it is negative in character."

Congress not for pre-poll alliance at national level

The Congress will not go in for an alliance at the national level for the Lok Sabha election, and seat sharing arrangements with the allies will be limited to adjustments at the State-level. At a Congress Working Committee meeting on Thursday, there were strong voices against giving into the allies' demands. Leaders such as Digvijay Singh, Mohsina Kidwai, Rahul Gandhi and Devendra Dwivedi even questioned the wisdom of going in for alliances in Uttar Pradesh (with the Samajwadi Party) and Bihar (RJD). The sentiment was that the party could not undertake to freeze its electoral ambitions and strategies to the May 2004 level. The assessment was that the party was better placed now than in 2004 to bargain and negotiate with current and potential allies. Though some members like R.K. Dhawan cautioned that there was no escape from the coalition arrangement, the consensus was that the party should not inherit the allies' liabilities. The U.P. members took particular note of the disquiet in the Muslim leadership on the issue of Kalyan Singh, the new tie-up of the SP. AICC general secretary Janardan Dwivedi told reporters that the post-poll 2004 ties would continue; talks with some new and possible allies were on and

those wanting to associate themselves with the party would be considered after the polls. "The nature of alliance will depend on the outcome of results. Realignments will be made after the elections and not before. Alliance is basically a game of numbers. It depends on who gets how many seats. This will be clear only after the elections. Hypothetically speaking, if the Congress gets absolute majority, the situation will be different," he said.

CPI (M) Polit Bureau to meet mid-February

Scotching speculation about uncertainty over the meeting of its Polit Bureau, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) said the panel is expected to meet during mid-February. "Normally the Polit Bureau meets some six weeks between two Central Committee meetings. The Polit Bureau meeting will be as scheduled sometime in mid-February and the dates are being worked out keeping in view that Parliament is scheduled to met between February 12 and 26," party general secretary Prakash Karat said. The Central Committee met last in Kochi between January 7 and 9.

As for the jatha from February 2-25 being led by party State Secretary Pinarayi Vijayan, he said the programme would proceed as planned with Polit Bureau member S. Ramachandran Pillai scheduled to be at the inauguration in Kasargod district. Chief Minister V.S. Achuthanandan and the general secretary are scheduled to attend a rally at its conclusion in Thiruvananthapuram.

Supreme Court reserves verdict on plea to allow negative voting

The Supreme Court on Thursday reserved verdict on a petition seeking a direction to the Centre and the Election Commission (EC) for incorporating a provision for "negative" voting in the Representation of the People Act, giving the voter the right to register his "rejection" of a candidate. Supporting the petitioner's stand, Ms. Arora said the Commission had as early as in December 2001 suggested that provisions be made in the law and rules for negative voting. She said changes should be brought about in the RP Act to allow this. Otherwise, rule 49-O of the Conduct of Election Rules would become redundant. Ms. Arora said a 'none of the above' (NOTA) option could be provided in the electronic voting machine. "Such a provision for negative voting would be in the interest of promoting democracy as that would send clear signals to the political parties and their candidates as to what the electorate thinks about them." In his reply, Mr. Sachar said the concept of negative voting was in vogue in many countries in the form of either a 'non-binding NOTA' or 'binding NOTA.'

Mumbai Attacks and Aftermath:

"Attack planned outside Pakistan"

Pakistan's probe into the Mumbai terror attacks has established that the unprecedented strikes were planned outside this country, according to a media report on Tuesday night. An initial probe conducted by a three-member team set up by the Interior Ministry has concluded that the 26/11 attacks were planned outside Pakistan, Dawn News channel quoted sources as saying. The team also stated in its report to the Interior Ministry that "no leads" had been found in Pakistan, the sources said. The report did not say where the attacks were planned, the channel reported. There was no official word on the development. The Ministry is expected to review the report on the initial probe on Thursday at a high-level meeting. It is also expected to submit a final report to the government by Saturday, Dawn News said.

Prosecution not possible: Gilani

After assurances that it would swiftly bring to book any Pakistani found involved in the Mumbai attacks, Islamabad on Friday said prosecution of the suspects would not be possible unless amendments were made to its own laws. Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani said Pakistan's anti-terror laws did not cover acts committed outside the country. "There are some discrepancies in the law. Our anti-terror laws need some alteration. If the offence is committed outside the country, we cannot prosecute unless we make amendments," he told journalists in Lahore. Mr. Gilani also ruled out extradition of Pakistani citizens to face charges in India as there was no bilateral legal arrangement. "So we do not have an extradition treaty with India, nor do we have laws to prosecute the suspects unless we make the amendments," the Prime Minister said.

No scope for China mediation: Congress

The Congress on Friday criticised Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi's statement that his country had authorised China to negotiate with India on its behalf to deal with the aftermath of the Mumbai terror attacks. Congress spokesman Manish Tewari said India-Pakistan issues had to be addressed within the parameters of the Shimla Agreement, the Lahore Declaration and the composite dialogue mechanism. "There is no scope for mediation or intervention by anyone else." According to the Congress, Mr. Qureshi's statement showed the fundamental difference between India and Pakistan. While India had an independent foreign policy and refused to be aligned with any one country since Independence, Pakistan allowed its foreign policy to be dictated by others. Mr. Tewari pointed out that Mr. Qureshi's statement came a day after U.S. President Barack Obama threatened to hold Pakistan accountable for security on Afghanistan border. "So, Pakistan went seeking China's help."

No country can be ambivalent to fight terrorism: Patil

In a rejection of Pakistan's contention that independent actors were behind the Mumbai attack, President Pratibha Patil said such arguments cannot be accepted as she asked the international community to take "decisive" action to fight terrorism. "No country can afford to take an ambivalent attitude in this fight. Arguments that terrorism is being perpetuated by independent actors are self-defeating and cannot be accepted," President Patil said without naming Pakistan in her address on the eve of the 60th Republic Day.Pakistan has washed its hands off any involvement in the Mumbai terror attack insisting that those behind it were non-state actors and that the official agencies had no role in it.Countries must own up their responsibilities in defeating terrorism, she said while asking the international community to take "decisive and united" action to combat terrorism, which poses a grave threat to the stability of the world.

26/11: More clues point to Bengal connection

A team from Maharastra police, that recently came to the city, found that the man arrested in connection with the terror attack on 26 /11 had obtained his driving licence from Hooghly. A senior administrative official in Hooghly said the driving licence was issued by the Arambag

Motor Vehicle Camp office in 2006. The man, Mohammed Rafiq, was arrested by officers of the Mumbai police's special task force from Mumbai following the terror attack.
Mr Soumya Purakait, additional district magistrate (development) said: “We are collecting the papers including medical certificate and photo identity proof on the basis of which the driving license to Rafiq was issued. We have found the register of the motor vehicle department in which Rafiq's name was mentioned. Rafiq's application forms for learners license and final license were handed over to Maharastra police”. He further said that motor vehicle officials were now trying to get hold of the papers on the basis of which the driving license was issued. Though it was also learnt that Rafiq had also managed to secure ration card from Chowkbazar in Hooghly, Mr Purakait said he had no reports to confirm it. “Officers of Maharastra police have recently come to Hooghly and held a meeting with us. They told us that the driving license was issued from Hooghly in 2006. We have assured them that we will provide them all necessary help to find out the persons who had helped Rafiq secure the driving license from Hooghly," Mr Purakait said. Asked whether district administration would initiate a probe to find out, how Rafiq managed to secure his driving license from Hooghly, Mr Purakait said: “We would first send all documents to Maharastra police. Then we would probe this angle.” Another senior district administrative official said they suspect that Rafiq had come to Hooghly and stayed there for some time earlier. “We also can't rule out the possibility that Rafiq has some contacts in Hooghly," said an official.

Pakistan probe will decide next turn in ties with India

When Islamabad reverts to India next week with the results of its initial investigation into the alleged involvement of Pakistani nationals in last November’s terror attacks in Mumbai, a lot more will be riding on its reply than just the fate of those who might be involved. At stake is the immediate trajectory of the bilateral relationship. Any sign that Pakistan is rejecting or stonewalling Indian claims of “elements” within its territory being involved in Mumbai would likely trigger a fresh cold wave in an atmosphere that is already dangerously frigid. But if Islamabad is able to demonstrate that its investigators are seriously pursuing investigative leads provided by India and other countries, the stage could well be set for the gradual easing of tension. Despite the occasionally harsh rhetoric from both sides, India-Pakistan ties have been in a holding pattern of sorts over the past six weeks. The main reason for this was the lengthy transition period from the Bush era to the Obama presidency. If India did not wish to prejudice the tenor of its relations with the new dispensation by presenting it with an escalatory fait accompli, Pakistan had no incentive to provide an outgoing administration with the reward of cooperation with the Indian probe. The result was the trading of verbal barbs and threats. Behind the scenes, however, Indian officials told their Pakistani counterparts that New Delhi was prepared to give Islamabad time to conduct its own investigations. And in turn, Pakistan assured India that its Federal Investigation Agency would pursue the leads provided to it with utmost seriousness and urgency. Privately, Pakistani officials also said the initial internal dissonance in their establishment was over and that “all stakeholders” were on the same page on the question of getting to the bottom of the Mumbai terror conspiracy. Indian officials told they never asked for an immediate deadline and that it was Pakistan which said it would try and complete its initial probe in 10 days flat. Unfortunately, or fortunately, for both countries, that self-imposed deadline is coming to an end at the same time that the Obama team is moving quickly to establish Washington’s new South Asia policy. Stonewalling carries both costs and benefits for Islamabad.

A deteriorating bilateral environment will likely goad President Barack H. Obama to demand more from Pakistan. But it will also strengthen the hands of those in his administration who look at Afghanistan, Pakistan and India as being inter-connected parts of the same strategic puzzle. Speculative reports from Pakistan about investigators there determining that the Mumbai attacks were planned elsewhere are not a good augury. Pakistan's FIA may well have its reasons for concluding that about the 'master plan' but what the situation calls for at the moment is the uncovering of the evidentiary trail unearthed so far by the Indian side. Though India provided Pakistan an abbreviated dossier of evidence more was shared with other countries there is much in it that is actionable, say senior officials. For example, India would like Pakistan to confirm the identity of the nine deceased terrorists.

Domestic Situation:

Indigenous tribute to the Buddha

Your eyes struggle to grasp the sense of vastness that greets you on stepping inside the dome. Sounds of hammer and chisel echo around in layers. Outside, away from the riotous sounds and smells of Mumbai, many pairs of hands are at work. Towering above them, ensconced in scaffolding, is the Global Vipassana Pagoda. One of the largest stone monuments in Asia is in its final stages of completion. Modelled on the lines of the Shwe Dagon Pagoda in Yangon, the Indian version aspires to pay homage to the Buddha and his teachings. It also stands as a tribute to Myanmar, which has through history cherished Buddhist secularist traditions and thought. The structure stands at an imposing 325 feet. Its dome, with a diameter of 280 feet, is the world's largest stone dome. There are no supporting pillars. Located on the green peninsular landscape of Gorai, the pagoda is an ambitious undertaking. It is a pinkish structure of sandstone brought from Jodhpur, cut and dressed. The stone blocks were assembled in Mumbai using the technique of interlocking, thus making it an indigenous architectural marvel in its own right. Large quantities of stone and much human effort have gone into the making of the pagoda. The foundation itself took 3,000 truckloads of stone, 1,000 truckloads of sand and 40,000 person-hours. The estimated cost of construction is Rs. 80 crore, raised through donations. The site, which will be open to the public by the second week of February, covers an area of 11 acres. Apart from being a wonder in stone, the pagoda is set to be an embodiment of the "non-sectarian, rational process of mental purification thorough self-observation" that is Vipassana.

Muslim organisations urged to issue fatwa against terrorism

The Dharma Raksha Manch, a coalition of Hindu religious institutions and leaders, has urged 13 major Muslim organisations to issue a fatwa against terrorism and jihad. At a press conference on Wednesday, Swami Dayanand Maharaj and others said that before a terror attack, e-mails were sent quoting the Koran. The Manch, concerned by religious motivation for terror, planned to send an appeal, signed by several acharyas, to the 13 Islamic institutions individually. When it was pointed out that many of them had condemned terror, representatives of the Manch said mere condemnation was not enough. The Muslim groups should issue a fatwa that India was not Dar-ul Harab (India is not a land against which Islamists have to wage a war); and it was Dar-ul Aman (land of peace), where Muslims can practise Islam without any impediment, said a resolution passed at a meeting of the Manch on Wednesday. Madandas Devi of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) said his organisation was fully behind this effort. The phrase "Hindu terror" was false, insulting and inappropriate. Ashok Singhal of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) said India had a sacred religious tradition and a spiritual identity. However, by making it a secular country,

that identity was being wiped out. While seeking a change in leadership at the Centre, the Manch said it was not supporting any political party.

Assam Rifles-NSCN(I-M) attrition war ends

The three-day war of attrition between the Assam Rifles and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isaac-Muivah) militants finally came to end on Friday evening as both sides withdrew from the camp site of the militants in Ukhrul district in Manipur. The Assam Rifles officials said that the camp of the NSCM (I-M) located there was cordoned off from January 19 since there cannot be any designated camp, Manipur not being covered by the ceasefire between the Centre and the NSCN(I-M). Tension mounted as the Assam Rifles personnel had taken up positions and did not allow any NSCN(I-M) cadre to come out or move in. Meanwhile the people of the district had taken out processions in the town demanding peace and an end to the standoff. Sources close to the NSCN (I-M) said that the Union Home Ministry had instructed both the Assam Rifles and the NSCN(I-M) to vacate the area. The Assam Rifles sources said that in 2007, another attempt was made to open a designated camp. However, the militants were evicted and the camp was destroyed. There was yet another attempt to open such a camp at Phungyar. But the Assam Rifles had destroyed the camp after evicting the cadres. The Assam Rifles sources said that the NSCN(I-M) had requested for safe passage which was granted for bringing about an amicable solution.

2 Pak ultras shot in Noida

Two suspected Pakistani terrorists, who were trying to enter New Delhi, were shot dead by the Uttar Pradesh Anti-Terrorism Squad in a pre-dawn encounter in Noida today, one day ahead of the Republic Day celebrations. The incident took place in sector-97 near the Unitech plot at 2.15 a.m. Police said the ultras, who were travelling in a stolen Maruti car bearing the fake number plate UP-14 E-9531, were cornered on the expressway after a long chase. Both men were wounded in the ensuing shootout and died on the way to hospital. Two AK-47 rifles, 120 rounds of ammunition, five hand-grenades, around 1.5 kg of RDX, a Pakistani passport and Rs 18,000 were recovered from them, the ADGP, Uttar Pradesh Mr Brij Lal, said. The ATS team was assisted by Noida police in the operation, he added."The ATS team chased them from Lalkuan area of Ghaziabad, as the terrorists entered Noida through Model Town area and informed the city police, who joined them. After a hot pursuit, the ultras fired at the police team and in the retaliatory fire, the two terrorists and an ATS personnel Vinod Kumar Singh were injured," said Mr Naveen Arora, SSP. "They were rushed to hospital, where the two terrorists were declared brought dead. The constable is out of danger," added Mr Arora. One of the terrorists, while being taken to hospital identified himself as Abu Ahamad alias Farooq, a resident of Okara in Pakistan, and his companion as Abu Ismail, from Rawalakot (PoK), added Mr Brij Lal. "The passport recovered from Farooq bears the name Ali Ahmed, resident of Rahimyaar Khan in Pakistan. Some documents like identity cards and diaries were also recovered from them, said the ADGP. Four Kashmiris have been detained by the police in this connection. ATS sources said the type of weapons used by the duo indicate that they may belong to the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba, involved in the 26/11 terror attack in Mumbai.

Rama Sena founder held but not for Mangalore attack

Mr Pramod Mutalik, founder-president of Sri Rama Sene, whose activists assaulted women in a Mangalore pub on Saturday, was arrested today. The arrest, however, was for an old case of inciting communal disharmony.Mr Mutalik was detained in Belgaum in north Karnataka. "Yes, we have arrested him in connection with a case pending against him in Davangere (a district in central Karnataka)," Ms Sonia Narang, Belgaum police superintendent, told IANS by telephone. Asked why he was not detained for the Mangalore attack, Ms Narang said: "We do not have any request from Mangalore. Once we get it, we will detain him (on that count)." Since the case against Mr Mutalik is registered in Davangere, he will be handed over to the police there, she said. Mr Mutalik was away in Maharashtra when a group of 40 people bashed up young women in a Mangalore pub. Sri Rama Sena claimed responsibility for the attack. Its Karnataka vice-president Mr Prasad Attavara and 26 others have been arrested for the Mangalore attack. Mr Mutalik has defended the attack in interviews to the media. But he also apologised to the victims. Protesting the arrest of Mr Attavar, suspected activists of the outfit today stoned some buses and set afire a lorry at Alpe on the city outskirts. However, no one was hurt in the incidents, police said. The activists pelted stones at two Karnataka State Road Transport Corproation (KSRTC) buses, damaged window panes and set afire a lorry at Alape on city outskirts, police said. When the crowd torched the lorry, people who were nearby immediately doused the fire; police said adding they have launched a manhunt to arrest those who indulged in the violence. Police had issued notices to media, including television channels, under Karnatka State Police Form No 28, to provide information regarding the assault in the pub.

Meanwhile, a key activist of Sri Ram Sene, Mr Dinakar Shetty, who owned the responsibility for the attack, is still at large. More than 25 Sriram Sene activists barged into the pub on Saturday night and assaulted the weekend revelers, including girls, there, after claiming they were dancing in an “obscene manner”. Faced with mounting criticism over the attack on women in a Mangalore pub, the BJP today termed it as an “unacceptable act of hooliganism” while regretting that its political opponents were levelling allegations against the Sangh without verifying facts.

“The Karnataka government has already initiated strong action against the unacceptable act of hooliganism that took place in Mangalore. The BJP condemns the incident in totality,” BJP President Mr Rajnath Singh said.

Cops, ULFA militants killed

Two policemen and a militant of United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) were killed while a five-year-old boy was injured when security forces and ULFA exchanged fire at Buragaon village in upper Assam’s Sivasagar district on Thursday. The deceased policemen included Assistant Sub-Inspector of Sonari police station.

Azamgarh Muslims bring protest to Delhi

A large number of Muslims from Azamgarh in Uttar Pradesh held a demonstration at Jantar Mantar here on Thursday demanding an end to alleged harassment of Muslim young men by the police and a judicial probe into the Batla House encounter in Delhi in which two alleged militants were killed last year. The protesters, including students, reached Old Delhi railway station in the afternoon by a packed "Ulema Special" from Azamgarh. On Parliament Street, the protesters, most of them wearing skull-caps, shouted slogans such as "Azamgarh Zindabad!" and "Ulema Council Zindabad!" and held placards that read: "We are students, not terrorists." Some teachers and students of universities in Delhi also took part in the protest march. "We want an impartial time-bound judicial probe into the Batla House encounter in Delhi by a sitting Supreme Court judge. We also want an end to police atrocities on young men of Azamgarh in the guise of tackling terror. They are living in constant fear and cannot lead a normal life," said Ulema Council convenor Maulana Amir Rashadi Madani. The demonstration was organised by the Coordination Committee for Indian Muslims, an umbrella organisation of five organisations and the Ulema Council of Azamgarh. Criticising the political parties for not supporting them on the issue, Mr. Madani said the Ulema Council would field candidates from Azamgarh Sadar and Lalganj in the coming Lok Sabha elections. "We are also trying for a third alternative. A few parties have come to our support. But we want any alternative to be headed by the Ulema Council," Mr. Madani, said, adding that the Muslims have supported others for nearly 60 years and now the latter should support the community. Co-ordination Committee for Indian Muslims convenor S.Q.R. Ilyas said: "We want the government to take action on our demands before the coming general elections. We will support only that political party which will work for us." "We want a judicial probe into the Batla House encounter and end to the stigmatising of young men from Azamgarh," said a protester.

Hindu leaders call for "religious India"

Hindu religious heads called for the creation of a "religious India" at a public meeting held here on Thursday. The meet, which saw representation from various Hindu organisations, was organised under a forum called the Dharma Raksha Manch. Vishwa Hindu Parishad leader Ashok Singhal and Janata Party leader Subramanian Swamy were present. "We do not want a secular Preamble. We want India to be declared a religious nation," said Swami Chinmayanandji Maharaj. Other leaders supported the view. They called upon the media not to use the term 'Hindu[tva] terror'.The religious body unanimously opined that India was predominantly Hindu and religious conversions were the cause of people turning away from the Hindu fold. Outlining their action plan, the 'manch' spoke of conducting 'yatras' throughout the country between February 20 and March 20, in a bid to draw people to the Hindu faith.

Katiyar to visit Darul Uloom

BJP national general secretary Vinay Katiyar, who had demanded a ban on Darul Uloom Deoband, will soon visit the Islamic seminary and address ulemas. The MP said he had received an invitation from Darul Uloom, which he had earlier this month alleged of having contacts with Pakistan-based terrorists organisations. Singing a different tune, Mr. Katiyar said there was no question of banning this "world-famed Islamic centre". "We should be proud that we have Deoband like Islamic centre in India which gives religious direction to rest of the world," he said. He claimed his earlier remarks on the seminary were guided by the report of the Second Administrative Reforms Committee, headed by senior Congress leader Verappa Moily which "blamed this Islamic seminary of having contacts with terrorists organisations". Earlier this month, Mr. Katiyar had demanded a ban on Darul Uloom if the seminary was harbouring

terrorism. “It is not me but the Congress which is saying that Darul Uloom had links with terrorists organisations,” he told PTI.

Economic Front:

Government announces cut in fuel prices

Passing on the benefit of the falling crude oil prices, the Central government cut the retail price of petrol by Rs. 5 a litre and that of high speed diesel by Rs. 2 a litre. The price of LPG was also reduced by Rs. 25 a cylinder. The decision to undertake a second cut in fuel prices in less than two months was taken at a meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs headed by External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee. He chaired the meeting in the absence of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who is recuperating from a heart surgery. With this, an LPG cylinder will cost Rs. 279.70 in Delhi, down from Rs. 304.70. In Chennai, the new price will be Rs. 314.60; in Kolkata, 327.05; and in Mumbai, 324.50. With the latest cut, the price of petrol in Delhi will come down to Rs. 40.62 a litre and diesel Rs. 30.86. In Chennai, petrol will cost Rs. 44.66 and diesel Rs. 32.98; in Kolkata petrol will cost Rs. 42 and diesel Rs. 31.74; and in Mumbai petrol will cost Rs. 44.80 and diesel Rs. 34.69.

Inflation rises again, up to 5.64%

Rising prices of food items, jet fuel and alcohol pushed up inflation marginally for the second consecutive week, to 5.64%. Inflation for the week ended January 17 inched up by 0.04% from 5.6% a week ago, even as beer and alcohol became dearer by 25%. It was 4.45% a year ago. Some of the food items that became expensive during the week due to the eight-day truckers' strike include maize, bajra, jowar, rice, sugar and gur. The truckers' strike, which began on January 5, restricted the movement of goods, leading to shortage and price rise. Among manufactured items, prices of caustic soda, zinc and sacking bags became expensive during the week. In the fuel goods category, jet fuel and furnace oil became dearer by 4% and 1% respectively. While the prices of fruit and vegetables remained unchanged during the week, those of cement and iron and steel declined marginally. Inflation, which declined for ten consecutive weeks, rose marginally for the week ended January 10 to 5.6%.

Two Price Waterhouse auditors held

Two partners of Price Waterhouse, statutory auditors of Satyam Computer Services, were arrested by the Crime Investigation Department (CID) of the Andhra Pradesh police on Saturday on charges of conspiracy, failure to scrutinise records and connivance. S. Gopalakrishnan and his deputy, Talluri Srinivas, had signed Satyam’s annual statements of accounts without performing their statutory duties as external auditors, a senior CID official told.. Citing a specific charge, he said they had accepted forged fixed deposit receipts and particulars of balances furnished by the company without any verification with bankers. Prosecutors informed the court in the last few

days that BNP Paribas had denied holding fixed deposits of Satyam that were reflected in the company's accounts. Earlier, HDFC, Basheerbagh branch, said it had no documents which were on the auditors' files.The official said the audit firm was paid an annual fee of Rs. 5 crore compared to a maximum of Rs. 2 crore incurred for the same job by other IT majors. With the arrest of the two auditors, the number of persons held in the Satyam fraud has gone up to six. During the arrest of the two auditors, the CID recovered several documents from the office of Price Waterhouse at the Madhapur Hi-Tech City here. It also summoned several middle-level managers of Satyam to the office of the Director-General of Police for questioning. The investigating agency is sharing information with the Serious Fraud Investigation Office (SFIO), which has seized documents of Maytas Infra and Maytas Properties companies run by the sons of the former Satyam chief, Ramalinga Raju. The SFIO found a mismatch between the trial balance (the balance in the account after a transaction) and what was claimed by Satyam in the current account number 00120559, New York branch of the Bank of Baroda. The difference was Rs. 1,733 crore.

Assocham plea

Industry association Assocham has urged RBI to ensure that cut in policy rates transpire effectively into lower lending rates as the industry continues to struggle due to credit crunch amidst demand slowdown. In an Assocham Business Barometer (ABB) survey of 150 CEOs and managing directors, a majority of 78 per cent of them have stated that the previous cuts by the apex bank could not improve their financing situation due to banks' unwillingness to lend money. The chamber also said that there was a huge scope for slashing the effecting lending rates by the banks as the Indian banking sector had recorded impressive growth in net interest income.

5,000 job cuts at Tata's Corus & JLR

Indian conglomerate Tatas are expected to cut as many as 5,000 jobs at their steel and auto subsidiaries in the UK Corus and Jaguar Land Rover in the coming weeks. About 3,500 jobs are anticipated to go at Corus this week itself, while Jaguar Land Rover is expected to see another 1,500 layoffs in the coming weeks, The Sunday Times has reported. "Britain's largest steel maker, Corus is poised to cut up to 3,500 jobs this week in one of the biggest blows yet to the faltering manufacturing sector. Further large-scale job losses are expected within weeks, with Jaguar Land Rover understood to be considering another 1,500 layoffs," the newspaper said. Tata group firm Tata Steel had purchased Anglo-Dutch steel maker Corus for about £6.7 billion ($12 billion) in 2007. Another group entity Tata Motors snapped up luxury car maker Jaguar Land Rover last year for more than $2 billion from American auto major Ford. Meanwhile, the report noted that job cuts at Corus were likely to "overshadow this week's announcement by Mr Lord Mandelson, the business secretary, of aid for the car industry". The UK government is expected to come up with assistance to boost the country's car industry, which is hit by the economic downturn. "It is understood the planned job cuts (at Corus) will come across the company's 23,000-strong British workforce, and are not expected to lead to the closure of any large sites," the report said. Quoting one industry insider, The Sunday Times said: "This is not about site closure. This is about making Corus in the UK competitive".

The newspaper said that union leaders had been in last-ditch talks with the government in an attempt to fend off some of the job cuts.

BCG to help Satyam revival

Satyam's board announced that it has appointed Boston Consulting Group as its management advisors and a three-member team would work closely "during this revival process". Employees' salaries would be paid on time. "An important point to note is that they will not be charging Satyam any fees for their services and this reflects their commitment to the task", Mr Deepak Parekh said. Simultaneously the board appointed Goldman Sachs and Avendus as investment bankers to advise the company on the way forward and to explore strategic options such as identifying strategic investors, obtaining expressions of intent and ensuring fair and transparent approach to the entire process. The board concluded most discussions relating to Satyam's finance requirements where the funds would help tide over "immediate, compelling operational expenses". The proposed management structure was discussed and a formal statement reflecting the plan of action would be released this week. "The company reaffirmed that the salaries for January would be paid as scheduled and that this would be achieved from its internal accruals and receivables", it said in a Press release. On the issue of inflated head count, "Further validations have been done relating to the employee numbers and there are sufficient data pointing to reinforce the understanding that the earlier reported numbers hold good", it said.
The board ruled out the possibility of selling 'parts' of Satyam. "The board has received several proposals. Some have shown interest in evaluating Satyam as an integrated entity, while others have expressed interest in portions of Satyam's business". The Securities and Exchange Board of India will appeal against the decision of a local Hyderabad court, which denied a day's custody of former Satyam chairman, Mr B Ramalinga Raju and his brother Mr Rama Raju to the regulator, the government said, PTI adds from New Delhi. "With Sebi's application there were certain technical issues. Now they would appeal to the court again," corporate affairs minister, Mr Prem Chand Gupta told reporters here.

Geo-strategic developments:

Somali pirates release Indian sailors

After nearly two months in captivity, 25 Indian sailors were released by Somali pirates on Thursday, though there was no word on whether any ransom was paid to the brigands. An official of the Directorate General of Shipping said 25 Indian and three Bangladeshi crew members of MT Biscaglia, a Liberian flag vessel that was hijacked on November 28 by Somali pirates in the

Gulf of Aden, were released on Thursday night. Relatives of one of the sailors claimed that pirates had initially demanded $15 lakh and later raised it to $ 25 lakh for the release of the crew but it was not clear whether the ransom was paid or not. Two Britons and an Irish sailor who were onboard the vessel had escaped by jumping into the sea after the pirate attack and they were later rescued. The chemical tanker was carrying 16,282 tonnes of cargo and was travelling between Indonesia and Europe. Biscaglia was the 97th vessel to be attacked in 2008 off the Somalian coast. The ship, operated out of Singapore by Ishima Private Ltd, is owned by a company in Marshall Islands. Eighteen Indian sailors were freed on November 16 after two months in captivity. A ransom amount of nearly $2.5 million was paid for their release.

Kashmir:

2 jawans, Al Badr commander killed

Two militants, including a top commander of the Al Badr outfit, and two jawans were killed in separate encounters in the Kashmir Valley on Wednesday.

Yoga, counselling to relieve stress among J&K troops

Army authorities in Jammu and Kashmir have chalked out a comprehensive strategy to deal with stress among troops deployed in inhospitable terrain. Admitting that the troops are facing hardship while fighting militancy, Defence Ministry spokesman based in Northern Command, Udhampur, Col. D.K. Kachari said that, to start with, a chunk of the officers would be trained as counsellors who in turn would counsel the jawans. "Two separate categories of counsellors have been trained by specialists. One comprises Junior Commissioned Officers from the Army Medical Corps who are to be available at a formation for monitoring stress management programmes, training and advice." The second category comprises JCOs and Non-Commissioned Officers from units who are trained to act as a friend and guide at the functional level. They are capable of identifying stress indicators and take or suggest immediate remedial action. So far about 1,200 officials have been trained and deployed. Besides counselling, the troops will be educated to understand and manage stress. The other measures are yoga, increased emphasis on group cohesion and constant interaction among officers, JCOs, other ranks and their families, and provision of recreational facilities including multigyms. Yoga led to better results, Col. Kachari said. He said the troops of the Northern command were deployed in harsh terrain and forced to withstand extremes of weather. Continuous vigil, relentless counter-infiltration and counter-terror operations, coupled with unresolved domestic problems, caused stress. The spokesman claimed that the number of suicides and fratricide cases in the Army had come down. "As against 44 cases of suicide and 10 cases of fratricide in 2005, there were only 34 cases of suicide and a single case of fratricide in 2008."

Social front:

White-bellied sea eagle numbers decline

Researchers at Andhra University have concluded that the population of the globally threatened species of white-bellied sea eagle (*Haliaeetus leucogaster*) is on the decline along India's south-western coast. There are only about 25 of the birds along the Visakhapatnam coast, with no increase in their numbers noticed over the past five years. According to B. Bharatha Lakshmi of

the Department of Zoology, Andhra University, habitat disturbances and coastal pollution are the main reasons behind the fall in the numbers of this magnificent raptor. “They are very sensitive to any kind of disturbances and may desert the nests and young ones if disturbed. Habitat destruction also affects breeding success.” The white-bellied sea eagle that belongs to the Accipitridae family is an endangered species listed in Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act. It is listed in the Red Data Book as a vulnerable species. It is one of the largest raptors in South-East Asia, and the second largest in the world. The species is also found in Australia, New Guinea, Indonesia, China and some countries of South-East Asia. In India, the largest concentration is in the Sunderbans: there are 50 to 60 birds here.

Slumdog debate: Shah Rukh slams critics on poverty jibe

Slamming the critics of Oscar nominated 'Slumdog Millionaire', Bollywood star Shah Rukh Khan has said that the poverty highlighted in the movie is a "reality" and wondered why people in India tend to become cynical when something good is happening. "Isn't that (poverty and slums) a reality? If you (critics) have a problem with the word slumdog, why don't you look positively and see that there is a word millionaire or 'crorepati' also". Critics felt that the movie sells India's poverty to West and some others had raised objections to the word 'slumdog' on grounds that people living in Indian slums were being referred to as 'dogs'.

Court rejects review plea against Husain

The Supreme Court refused to review its order declining to initiate criminal proceedings against noted painter M.F. Husain for allegedly hurting public sentiments through some of his paintings, including the one on ‘Bharat Mata,’ that were termed obscene. A three-judge Bench of Chief Justice K.G. Balakrishnan and Justices P. Sathasivam and J.M. Panchal dismissed the review petition filed by Maharashtra-based Dwaipayan Venkateshacharya Varkhedkar against the dismissal of his special leave petition on September 8, 2008. The Bench said there was no merit in the petition. The petitioner had challenged a Delhi High Court verdict quashing the criminal proceedings initiated against Mr. Husain in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. The paintings, allegedly depicting Bharat Mata and Hindu gods and goddesses in an obscene manner, had created a furore and he received threats from the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Bajrang Dal. As a result, the painter is living in a self-imposed exile in Dubai. The proceedings against the painter were initiated on the basis of complaints filed in Panderpur (Maharashtra), Rajkot (Gujarat) and Indore (Madhya Pradesh).

Foreign Relations:

“No solution to Tamils problem without Congress support”

Arguing that a solution to the Sri Lankan Tamils problem could not be found without the support of the Congress, the party’s whip Peter Alphonse said the Indo-Sri Lankan accord alone could offer a lasting solution. Speaking on a special calling attention motion in the Assembly, Mr. Alphonse said the accord secured some rights for the Tamils and could have secured more. “But the LTTE spoiled everything. They took assistance from the Sri Lankan Army and confronted the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF),” he alleged. He said the LTTE was not allowing the staff of the United Nations to return from the Wanni with the convoy that had gone there to deliver relief

supplies to the displaced Tamils. While stressing that the plight of the Tamils should come to an end, he pointed out that ceasefires in the past had not helped in finding a lasting solution. Mr. Alphonse questioned the tone in the argument of some leaders, who wanted an immediate solution to a problem, which, he said, dated back to five decades.

Kazakhstan signs agreement to supply uranium

India and Kazakhstan on Saturday signed a major agreement for supply of uranium and a comprehensive cooperation in civil nuclear energy programme. Kazakhstan also invited India to join in uranium exploration .The pact was among a clutch of agreements singed here during the visit of President Nursultan Nazarbayev. President Pratibha Patil was present on the occasion as External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee his Kazhakstan counterpart, Marat Tazhin signed the extradition treaty. Besides these, both countries also signed a protocol on the accession of Kazhakstan to the World Trade Organisation (WTO); a Memorandum of Understanding between the Indian Space Research Organisation and National Space Agency and between ONGC Mittal Energy Ltd and National Company KazMunai. As per the nuclear agreement, Kazakhstan will supply uranium to India under terms and conditions that would be discussed and decided later. "It is a big step forward towards achieving our targets for generating nearly 30,000 MWe of nuclear power by 2020. This is a historic agreement between the two nations and would strengthen ties and bilateral cooperation," Minister of State for Commerce and Power Jairam Ramesh, who signed the agreement on the WTO accession, said. It was decided that both countries would formulate a comprehensive agreement at a later stage for cooperation in civil nuclear energy area. Kazakhstan also expressed keen interest in purchasing nuclear reactors from India in the near future. Kazakhstan invited Indian companies and government to join hands for uranium mining in its country and provide necessary expertise for the same. On the other hand, India also extended its full support to Kazakhstan for its accession to the WTO. Kazakhstan has also completed bilateral WTO related talks with 22 countries and India has responded positively to its request to become part of the WTO. India also offered help to provide training facilities to Kazhakstan officials to deal with the WTO matters. In another agreement, Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Videsh Limited (OVL) and its partner company Mittal Energy Limited signed a deal with Kazakhstan's state owned KazMunai Gas to take a 25 per cent stake in Kazakhstan's prospective Satpayev oil field in the Caspian Sea. Kazakhstan had initially identified the Satpayev and Makhambet blocks in the Caspian Sea for giving a 50 per cent stake in one of them to OVL. Later it reduced the stake on offer to 25 per cent on condition that the Indian flagship will team up with steel baron Lakshmi N Mittal for entry. KazMunaiGas will hold the remaining 75 per cent stake in Satpayev.

Hillary calls up Pranab

The new U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, on Friday called up External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee, expressing her desire to work together to take the relationship between India and the U.S. to a new level. The Ministers agreed that they would like to further strengthen the excellent bilateral relationship.

Pranab slams LTTE

As the Sri Lankan military was on the verge of vanquishing Tamil Tigers, external affairs minister Mr Pranab Mukherjee rushed to Colombo with an assertion that India has no sympathy for LTTE

but wanted to see that civilian Tamils do not become victims of conflict. He will hold talks with President Mahinda Rajapakse on the latest situation in Sri Lanka's north, where the military has claimed to have captured Mullaithivu, the last bastion of LTTE, and said that its offensive was 95 per cent complete. Ahead of his departure, Mr Mukherjee said: “We are for fight against terrorists and all sorts of terrorism. Therefore, we have no sympathy for any terrorist activity indulged in by any organisation, particularly LTTE (which) is a banned organisation in India.” At the same time, he said India is concerned over the plight of civilians and “we shall have to see how civilians can be protected and they do not become hapless victims of the situation.” He is expected to impress upon the Rajapakse government the need for looking for a political settlement to the ethnic problem to ensure aspirations of all communities, including ethnic Tamils, are taken care of within a united Sri Lanka. India believes that military victory is no solution to the problems afflicting Sri Lanka. Mr Mukherjee is also expected to press for early implementation of the devolution package which is aimed at ensuring equal rights and privileges to all sections of the society. The visit comes in the backdrop of repeated demands by Tamil Nadu chief minister Mr M Karunanidhi and other political leaders that Mr Mukherjee should be sent to Sri Lanka to ensure end to military offensive against LTTE. Sri Lanka has accused the LTTE of using the civilians, estimated between 100,000 and 250,000, as human shield. The Tigers say that the civilians have taken shelter with them for their own protection. Earlier, a source close to the Sri Lankan government told IANS in Colombo that Mr Mukherjee's “is a friendly visit that has been pending for some time”. Indian foreign secretary Mr Shivshankar Menon visited Colombo in the middle of this month and met President Rajapakse and other senior leaders in the government and discussed a variety of issues. The civilian suffering in Sri Lanka's war zone has also been taken up by the United Nations, which has called upon both Colombo and the Tigers to respect non-combatants.

’Pakistan’s envoy to India gets death threats’, Pakistan Protested

Protesting over the death threats received by country’s high commissioner to India Shahid Malik, Pakistan on Sunday asked India to Provide full security to the country’s envoy as well as other diplomats and investigate the matter immediately. India had been told verbally and in written that it would be held responsible in case of any harm to the high commissioner, said Foreign Office Spokesman Tariq Muhammad in an exclusive chat with Online. We are in touch with India and reviewing the whole situation closely, he said while confirming country’s envoy to India Shahid Malik has received death threats via letter instead of email, asking him to leave in three days or face dire consequences. India should ensure security to country’s envoy and other diplomats and sincerely investigate the letter, he said. Earlier, Pakistan’s high commissioner to India Shahid Malik has received death threats from an outfit calling itself the All India Anti-Terrorism Group that has also threatened to strike at the diplomatic mission in New Delhi and at the Parliament in Pakistan. A three-page letter mailed to the mission in New Delhi asked High Commissioner Shahid Malik to leave in three days or face dire consequences, Indian media reported. "We don’t need to make any kind of relation and have no place for any Pakistani in our country," the letter said, adding: "If the threat is taken lightly, it is 200 per cent sure the envoy will be killed." The AIATG, which said had three sub-groups - Students of Hinduism Movement in India and Pakistan, Students Against Terrorism, and Pride of India - stated there were 11 reasons it was formed. "You can understand we have many reasons to take lethal steps against you and your

country, so tell your government that we are mad, zealot and thirsty for Pakistani blood," the letter maintained. According to India Radio, the security of Pakistan's diplomatic mission in New Delhi has been stepped up after life threat to Pakistan's envoy to India Shahid Malik. The letter is being reviewed, said the Radio.

BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

ASIA REPORT

February 11, 2009

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BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

SOUTH & EAST ASIA and GCC & Fertile Crescent

Nadia Tasleem

Weekly Report from 31 January 2009 to 6 February 2009

Presentation: 11 February 2009

This report is based on the review of news items focusing on political, economic, social and geo-strategic developments in various regions namely; India, East Asia, GCC and Fertile Crescent from 31 January 2009 to 6 February 2009 as have been collected by interns.

Summary

India:

Political Front:

Election campaigns seem to be in full swing in ***India*** for upcoming elections that have to be held in April/May. All parties are trying to get more votes by justifying their positions on one hand and accusing rest of the parties on the other hand. In this regard Samajwadi Party (SP) had to face huge criticism because of including Kalyan Singh (former BJP member and Chief Minister of UP at the time of demolition of Babri Mosque). SP however claimed that he has passed through the process of reformation and has become proponent of secularism. In order to avoid Muslims' criticism, SP has also announced to give 25% seats to Muslims in UP. Meanwhile Chief EC's recommendation to change Election Commissioner because of being controversial is yet another important issue; that has emerged at Indian political front. Besides election preparations India seems badly stuck with naxal movement that has been targeting a number of police and security forces causing unrest mainly in Orissa, Jharkand, and Bihar etc.

As far as Mumbai attacks and its aftermath is concerned; Indians still accuse Pakistan for its involvement in these attacks hence has been asking the respective regime to take serious action to punish culprits. In this regard Indian government has ruled out option of war with Pakistan. Pakistan, however, has found connection of a third party; probably Bangladesh, in planning 26/11.

Geo-strategic Front:

India has signed a key safeguard agreement with IAEA to allow inspection of additional civilian reactors. Meanwhile India and France have signed first commercial pact to build atomic power plants. Besides that India has asked LTTE to give safe passage to civilians. Indian security advisor has also asked US not to relate Pak-Afghan border situation with J&K situation. An Indian has been alleged of having links with Al-Qaeda, by Spanish government.

Economic Front:

Weak economic data and prospects of rising bad loans affected investor sentiment in ***India*** hence the BSE Sensex closed at 9,067, down 357 points, its biggest single-session loss in four weeks. Meanwhile Indian government seems scared about possible decline in exports amidst global financial crisis.

East Asia:

Political Front:

At ***Malaysian*** political front crisis occurred in Perak leading ruling Barisan National to hold power. People in ***Philippines*** want their leaders to learn lesson from the US President Barack Obama for upcoming elections 2010. Sharp division within ***Thai*** public in context of their support for different political parties or leaders has still created tension for new PM. Anti regime rallies have again erupted in the country.

Social Front:

Indonesian Muslim Ulemas have expressed positive hopes regarding US President Barack Obama in terms of bridging gap between Muslims and Christians. Besides that Indonesian second largest Muslim organization 'Muhammadiyah' has offered assistance to Rohingya Muslims; refugees from Burma. Meanwhile government has announced to repatriate Burmese refugees. Situation in Southern ***Philippines*** seem to be quite dangerous as rebels and security troops seem to be at war. The Economist's distributors in ***Thailand*** have refused to circulate the current affairs magazine for a second week running because of an article critical of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and the army.

Geo-strategic Front:

Japan announced to grant the ***Indonesian*** government a loan of 21 million U.S. dollars to improve their bilateral cooperation in the energy sector and to sustain Indonesia's liquid natural gas (LNG) export to Japan. Meanwhile India claimed that its relation with Indonesia would not get effected due to current economic crisis. ***Malaysia*** also share close ties with Japan because of its Look East policy. ***Philippines*** and Brunei have signed agreements to help each other in field of agriculture and IT respectively. Meanwhile Brunei has also announced to send more peace keepers to Philippines. ***Cambodian*** and ***Thai*** negotiators have again failed to reach an agreement to end a long-running dispute over their shared border, but announced to hold new talks in mid-April.

Economic Front:

The ***Malaysian*** government announced to build at least 25,000 low-cost houses nationwide this year through the economic stimulus package launched by the government recently. Meanwhile CIMB Chief Executive has given five points proposal to deal with current economic slump. Malaysian Finance minister has also introduced the idea of launching an official blog to form economic policy. More than 80,000 ***Filipinos*** seem to be in danger of loosing jobs amidst ongoing economic turmoil. A number of ***Singaporeans*** have lost their jobs as a result of the recent global financial turmoil. Meanwhile many are hunting for stable employment in the current period of uncertainty. However companies in Singapore claim to have enormous potential to survive current economic decline. A number of Singaporeans have lost their jobs as a result of the recent global financial turmoil. Meanwhile many are hunting for stable employment in the current period of uncertainty. PM of ***Vietnam*** announced denounced any need of devaluation of their currency 'dong' because of having enough dollars in banking system. On the other hand Vietnam's stock market fell to its lowest level this week since December 2005 as VN-Index ended the day down 2.9 per cent, or 8.3 points, to close at 277.8. ***Cambodian*** PM Hun Sen lambasted Western countries for the economic crisis, blaming them for corruption and mismanagement at an economic conference in Phnom Penh. Meanwhile he also announced to have the target of 6pc growth this year.

Fertile Crescent:

Political Front:

Provincial elections in ***Iraq*** dominated political scene. 459 observers thoroughly monitored election process and expressed satisfaction despite few incidents of unrest and violence. 51% voters' turn out has also been considered as quite satisfactory. Ruling regime has expressed her willingness to form coalition government in various provinces where elections were held. Election preparations are in full swing in ***Israel***. No formal ceasefire accord has yet been signed between Israel and Palestine. Mahmood Abbas condemned Hamas for not giving respect to PLO but Hamas denied such accusations. ***Lebanese*** political parties seem busy in election campaign for upcoming parliamentary elections that have to be held in June. Sunni leaders have stressed upon the need to hold elections in time. National Bloc Party leader Carlos Edde accused Free Patriotic Movement leader Gen. Michel Aoun of "pumping hatred into the Lebanese people." He further claimed that People like Aoun have totally neglected their own Christian values.

Social Front:

Iran and ***Iraq*** have agreed to sign tourism deal to boost tourist industry. A shoe has been thrown at ***Israeli*** ambassador in Sweden because of Israeli atrocities being carried against Palestinians.

Geo-strategic Front:

Israeli warplanes attacked the Gaza-Egypt border, hitting a number targets; no causalities however were reported. South African dock workers have refused to off-load a ship full of products from Israel. This action follows a decision by the South African Trade Unions Congress to engage in boycott and sanctions against what they call apartheid in Israel. The action is part of a week of protests and rallies in South Africa, including union protests in front of the South African Zionist Federation, and dock blockades. Meanwhile Hamas thanked Iran for its extensive support against Israel. ***Syria*** extended full support for Palestinians and condemned Israel for its atrocities. Meanwhile Syrian students expressed appreciation and respect for the honorable stances of Turkish Premier Recep Tayyib Erdogan and his support to the Arab and Islamic just and human issues, particularly the Palestinian issue. Hamas and ***Egyptian*** official held talks in Cairo aimed at achieving a long-term truce in Gaza, though it hasn't bore fruit till not. The Israeli navy opened fire in the direction of a ***Lebanese*** vessel heading towards the Gaza Strip and assaulted some of the people on board the ship carrying humanitarian aid. Meanwhile HezbAllah accused all those Arab states who have agreed to make truce with Israel.

Economic Front:

An ***Iraqi*** investment official said the repercussions of the global financial crisis have functioned as a catalyst to attract foreign capital to the local market. Meanwhile the Iraqi Ministry of Oil achieved an increase in the country's oil exports of more than two million barrels in Jan. 2009, compared to Dec. 2008.

GCC:

Political Front:

Saudi Arabia has published a list of 85 suspected militants wanted around the world who it said had been drawn to "deviant" ideologies—a reference to the Al Qaeda terror network. The list, published by the official news agency SPA, includes 83 Saudis and two Yemenis and calls for the suspects to turn themselves in to the authorities. At ***Bahrainian*** political front budget talks between MPs and the government collapsed last week, casting serious doubts over Bahrain's spending for the next two years.

Social Front:

Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al Sheikh has come out heavily against the practice of poetry contests and reality shows hosted by several satellite television channels. Health issues remained prominent at ***Oman's*** social front. ***Kuwait's*** parliament has decided to vote on a bill that lays down tough penalties for employers abusing foreign worker after US criticism and violent protests by Asian laborers, but critics do not have positive hopes.

Geo-strategic Front:

Saudi Arabia's National Recruitment Committee and concerned Indonesian agencies have agreed to resume recruitment of housemaids and workers from the largest Muslim country to Saudi Arabia. Prince Saud Al-Faisal, Foreign Minister, and George Mitchell, US MidEast envoy, discussed "the importance of moving the peace process forward" to achieve an independent, contiguous and viable Palestinian state. Meanwhile growing Saudi relation with Turkey and China are also significant. Above all that Saudi King's appeal of unity to Palestinians has been appreciated by various Arab countries. As far as ***Bahrain*** is concerned its recently signed agreement of cooperation with Philippines is worth mentioning. ***UAE*** signed agreement with Philippines to boost ties; meanwhile growing relation of UAE with Pakistan, Bahrain, Ireland, Australia and African Union also grabbed attention. Unlike growing ties with various states State Minister of Foreign Affairs has strongly condemned Iran for waging war of words with UAE. Besides above mentioned geo-strategic developments all states of Gulf region have extended their support for Palestinians and have sent huge aid packages to them.

Economic Front:

The ***UAE*** Ministry of Economy has proposed a new set of initiatives to strengthen the economy and minimize the impact of the global financial crisis, including setting up of a common

emergency committee and stronger transparency norms. Meanwhile UAE Foreign Trade also stressed the strength of UAE economy and its preparedness to deal with potential impact of the World Financial Crisis on local economy. ***Oman*** crude oil rose after Saudi Arabia increased prices of its supplies, requiring refiners to seek alternative grades. Meanwhile Oman remained active in boosting economic ties with Morocco, Germany and Libya. Just like Oman, government of ***Qatar*** remained keen in enhancing economic ties with Saudi Arabia, USA, Japan, Turkey, and Italy. Qatar hopes to register a growth of around 10 percent in real terms in 2009 which would make it one of the world's fastest growing economies this year. ***Kuwait*** has witnessed a 30 percent drop in sales of automobiles and electronic appliances due to the economic crisis.

BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

Fertile Crescent

Aisha Rehman

From 31st January to 6th Feb., 2009

Presentation date 11th Feb**.**

IRAQ

Political News

- Violations mar elections – network
- Violation claims should be evidenced- UN envoy
- Polling centers in Rasafa see high turnout– IHEC
- Only 34 persons allowed to vote in Halabcha
- Sadrist MP fears election rigging
- Provincial elections "important" in Iraq's contemporary history – VP
- Maliki praises Iraqis, terms elections "successful"
- Participation in local elections all over Iraq 51% - IHEC
- Sadrists in one bloc with INL, reform movement
- UN envoy meets fact-finding committee in Kirkuk
- Sadr refuses to negotiate detainees with U.S. army
- Maliki's office denies contact with AMSI's head
- Religious cleric urges election winners to bury the hatchet
- Coming regional premier from PUK – Kurdistan's PM
- We remained key players in Iraq – SIIC
- British commander says ready to withdraw from Basra by July
- Barazani leaves for Kuwait on Gulf tour
- Crocker in Sulaimaniya
- U.S. forces propose release of 1,500 detainees
- Parl. resumes sessions to elect speaker
- Parl. resumes sessions to elect speaker
- Kurdistan seeks to boost ties with U.S. – representative
- Iraq's government allocates $65 million for national interest – spokesman
- Al-Maliki ready to form alliances in provincial councils

Social Front

- Iran and Iraq working on new tourism deal

Geo Strategic Front

Economic Front

- Jordan grants facilities for Iraqi investors soon
- 45 % of Sulaimaniya's budget for 41 projects
- Global crisis attracts capital to Iraq – INIC
- U.S. forces hand over al-Adl mall to Trade Ministry
- Iraq's oil exports up by 2 million barrels in Jan.
- Trade ministry refuses to receive cooking oil from industry ministry
- Deputy premier discusses oilfields with French company
- Japanese firms face fierce competition in Iraq
- Electricity ministry to warn Russian firm

- $25 billion surplus staves off financial crisis – Iraqi minister

PALESTINE AND ISRAEL

Political Front

- Hamas negotiators return empty-handed from Cairo talks
- Candidate for Israeli Prime Minister: No return of stolen Palestinian land
- Mash'al: we are working towards a political organization that represents all Palestinians
- Palestinian president Abbas: No dialogue with those who reject PLO
- Hamas: The idea to form factional reference body does not obliterate PLO
- Shoe hits Israeli ambassador to Sweden
- Israeli elections; an open season for racism

Security Front

- Palestinian President: Israel must be held responsible for war crimes
- Israeli warplanes raid Gaza-Egypt border
- Barak suggests tunnel to link Gaza with the West Bank
- Olmert, Barak, considering further strikes in Gaza
- Israeli Authorities demolish a Palestinian owned garage and warehouse in Jerusalem

Geo Strategic Front

- US Congress introduces bill to punish UNRWA
- South African dockworkers refuse to off-load Israeli goods
- UN chief meets Egyptian president for talks over Gaza
- Hamas: We accepted an Egyptian invitation for talks in Cairo
- US is Looking to Work with all the Parties, Says Clinton Secretary of State: Hamas must renounce violence
- President Abbas Meets Sarkozy in Paris Leaders Discuss Truce, Gaza Reconstruction
- President Abbas Heads to Cairo Truce, Unity on Top of Visit's Agendas

SYRIA

Political Front

- Cabinet listens to political review by Premier Ottri
- President al-Assad Presides Over PNF Meeting, Underlines Israel's Failure in Gaza
- Interior Minister Discusses with Koman Preparations for Holding Arab Interior Ministers Council in Beirut

Economic Front

Geo Strategic Front

- Ottri during Meeting with Volunteer Doctors Heading for Gaza: Syria Supports the People of Gaza and their Resilience
- Israeli unfair verdicts against two Syrian captives are null and void
- President al-Assad Accepts Credentials of Indian Ambassador in Damascus
- President al-Assad Sends a Congratulation Cable to Sri Lankan President on Occasion of National Day
- Kaddah Reviews Bilateral Cooperation with a Venezuelan Delegation
- Al-Abrash Discusses Bilateral Relations with Venezuelan Parliamentary Delegation
- Sweid underlines important role of Syrian and Venezuelan MPs to uncover Israeli crimes
- Al-Moallem Receives Credentials of Iraqi Ambassador to Syria
- Lutfi Discusses Bilateral Relations with Chairman of Belgian-Syrian Businessmen Council
- Syria Condemns the Israeli Navy Piracy Against Lebanese Fraternity Ship
- Minister of Information Underlines Distinguished Syrian-Venezuelan Relations
- President al-Assad Receives a Verbal Message from Sultan Qaboos bin Said

Social Front

- 5th Arab Youth Forum Kicks Off
- Bkheitan Receives Yoouth Delegation, Confirms Importance of Consolidating Ideology of Resistance
- Syrian students appreciate Erdogan stances

EGYPT

Political Front

-
- Hamas meets Egypt intelligence chief on Gaza truce

Economic Front

- Indian investor raises bid for Egyptian firm

Geo Strategic Front

- Gaza violence simmers as Egypt holds truce talks
- Egypt to host Gaza reconstruction forum March 2
- Egypt prevents Hamas taking millions into Gaza: official
- Israel dropped Shalit truce demand: Hamas official
- Egypt prevents Hamas taking millions into Gaza

Social Front

- UNRWA accuses Hamas of stealing Gaza aid packages
- Tourism contracts hit by crisis

LEBANON

Political Front

- Gemayel welcomes alliance with Murr in June elections
- Calls for Lebanon's middle bloc gain steam
- Hariri: We Would Not Allow Attempts to Suffocate Beirut
- Hariri says parliamentary elections to be held on time
- Edde: Aoun is spreading hatred in lebanon
- Baroud Launches Election Newsletter

Social Front

- Edde to Aoun: Where Are Your Christian Values?
- Skaf family says its son is still an Israeli prisoner
- U.N. criticizes Israel and Hamas

Security Front

- Hizbullah Threatens Arabs Who Accept Peace with Israel
- 5 rockets found in south Lebanon near Israeli border
- Fatah Islam Detainee Admits to Attack on UNIFIL
- Israeli navy attacks Gaza-bound Lebanese aid ship
- Israel Vows Painful Response to Any Hizbullah Attack
- Hamas official allowed into Gaza without the cash

Geo Strategic Front

- Lebanese "Brotherhood Ship" Ordeal Ends after Israel Releases Passengers
- Jumblat Hammers FPM, Hamas, Syria, Iran

- Israel Says Hezbollah Planning Murder Or Abduction Bid
- Lebanon: New Palestinian group 'planning attack' on Egyptian embassy
- Hamas thanks Iran for its support in Gaza war

Economic Front

- Riad Salameh Named Best Middle East Central Bank Governor

IRAQ

POLITICAL NEWS

Violations mar elections – network

The Iraqi election information network, Iraqi Ein, said that violations marred the electoral process in Baghdad, Mosul and Diala, according to a member of the network."In its first report about the election, the network demonstrated violations that took place during the early hours of the provincial election in Iraq on Saturday," Saeed al-Batati told "Some of the violations occurred before and after the beginning of election, such as the late opening of some polling centers- 30 minutes after 07:00 am," he said. "Some of the centers used voting pens that were not provided by the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC)," he added. "Some polling centers were moved to others, such as two centers in Baghdad and Diala, without knowing the reasons, a matter that disturbed voters," he noted. He referred to the presence of electoral ads at polling centers, and that unauthorized elements interfered when there was an attempt to remove the ads. Al-Batati pointed out the police forces in Karbala arrested two persons who were campaigning for candidates inside a polling center.

Violation claims should be evidenced- UN envoy

Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General (SRSG) in Iraq Staffan de Mistura on Saturday said that claims about the existence of violations in the current provincial elections should be backed up by evidence. "Violation claims should be supported by evidence and should be thoroughly investigated by the electoral commission with the support of the United Nations," De Mistura said in a press release in Anbar province. The UN official said that there are nearly 490 local observers in polling

centers all over the country. He also expressed his relief at the level of women's participation in the election.

Polling centers in Rasafa see high turnout– IHEC

The media director of the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) in Baghdad, Rasafa side, on Saturday said that 99 percent of the polling centers in the area are currently seeing a high turnout. "The early hours of the morning saw low turnout, but after 11:00 am, the situation has changed," Hussein Ali Abdelameer told Aswat al-Iraq news agency. He praised the role of Iraqi forces in preserving security and prevening violations.

Only 34 persons allowed to vote in Halabcha

Only 34 persons in Halabcha are allowed to vote in the ongoing provincial election, despite the presence of a larger number of displaced people in the suburb, the director of provincial elections center in Halabcha said "There are a large number of displaced people in Halabcha, 80 km southeastern Sulaimaniya, but only 34 persons in the district are allowed to vote," Lateef Othman told "This issue occurred as voters' names were not registered with the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC)," he said.

Sadrist MP fears election rigging

Spokesperson for the Sadr parliamentary bloc said that he has fears of rigging the results of the elections in that some voters' registration folders went missing in some provinces, attributing the responsibility for this issue to political sides that he did not name. "There are some indications of election rigging by withdrawing some voters' registration folders from some polling stations in a number of provinces, to prepare for rigging the elections," Ahmed al-Masaodi told Aswat al-Iraq news agency. For his part, the Iraqi Minister of Interior, Jawad al-Bolani, announced that the election security plan that was implemented on Saturday has succeeded, describing Iraqi people's participation in the elections as good.

Provincial elections "important" in Iraq's contemporary history – VP

The Iraqi Vice President Adil Abdilmahdi on Saturday said that provincial elections are "important" in Iraq's contemporary history, because it puts Iraq on the path to democracy. "It represents a big state of awareness among Iraqi voters," Abdilmahdi told the press after he voted at one of the polling centers in Baghdad.

Maliki praises Iraqis, terms elections "successful"

Iraqi President Nouri al-Maliki on Saturday expressed thanks to the Iraqi people and organizations that did their best to render the 11-hour marathon local elections

"successful" less than one hour before all voting centers close in 14 Iraqi provinces. The premier also praised Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) staff for their efforts and the security agencies that protected the citizens during the course of the voting. Voting centers in Baghdad and other 13 provinces started at 07:00 a.m. Baghdad local time to receive eligible voters who are electing their candidates to occupy all 440 seats in local councils amidst blanket security measures.

Participation in local elections all over Iraq 51% - IHEC

Participation in the local council elections all over Iraq reached 51 percent, according to Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) "The number of Iraqis who cast their votes all over the country reached 7.5 million," IHEC chief Faraj al-Haydari said in a press conference he held in Baghdad, attended by Aswat al-Iraq news agency. Earlier (Feb. 1), the IHEC said in a press release that it will hold a press conference in al-Rasheed hotel to be attended by the commission chief and ambassadors of Arab countries to shed light on participation in the elections and some of the initial results.

Sadrists in one bloc with INL, reform movement

An agreement has been made between the Iraqi National List (INL), the Reform Movement, the Sadrists, the Iraqi National Congress (INC), and independents to form a bloc in Najaf's provincial council if they win in the local elections. "The Sadrist movement will lead the bloc," the head of the INL in Najaf, Abdelal al-Issawi, told On Saturday (Jan. 31), voters headed to polling stations in Baghdad and 13 other Iraqi provinces to elect their representatives in the country's provincial councils amidst tight security measures.

UN envoy meets fact-finding committee in Kirkuk

A UN representative for Iraq met with a fact-finding committee to discuss trespasses on public property in Kirkuk in the aftermath the U.S.-led invasion. "Today, the seven-member fact-finding committee of the Iraqi Parliament met in the governorate's building with the deputy special representative for Iraq, Andrew Gilmour, to reach solutions to the trespasses on state property in Kirkuk after 2003," the media director in the province, Daleer Samad, told Aswat al-Iraq news agency. Several Iraqi parliamentarians attended the meeting, Samad explained.

Sadr refuses to negotiate detainees with U.S. army

Young Shiite cleric Sayyid Muqtada al-Sadr on Monday said he rejects that his followers joined negotiations with U.S. forces to release detainees, considering this issue "harmful" for the reputation of the Iraqi resistance that he called "honest." "No one has the right to negotiate with the occupier for the sake of detainees," Sadr said in a written reply to a question addressed to him by a group of the Sadr movement's detainees. "Negotiations' result is the end of resistance," al-Sadr explained in the release that was distributed by his office in Najaf and

received by Aswat al-Iraq news agency. “Detainees’ issue is not in their (U.S. forces) hand, but presumably in the hands of Iraqis (Iraqi officials) only, and they promised me to release them,” he noted.

Maliki’s office denies contact with AMSI’s head

The office of the prime minister denied contact with the head of the Association of Muslim Scholars in Iraq (AMSI), saying that his claims reflect “failure and bankruptcy.” “The office of Premier Nouri al-Maliki denies having contact with the so-called Harith al-Dhari, as he told the Boghdadiya satellite channel,” according to a statement released by the office “The national unity government would not in any way have contact with those whose hands are stained with the blood of innocent Iraqi people,” the statement added. The AMSI is a group of religious leaders in Iraq. It was formed on the 14th of April 2003, four days after the U.S.-led invasion, by a group of scholars who aimed to represent Sunnis in Iraq. Though not a political party, the association is considered to be politically influential.

Religious cleric urges election winners to bury the hatchet

Shiite Cleric Basheer al-Najafi called on the winners in the provincial council elections to overcome political and partisan differences and to work together in the interest of the Iraqi people. “They should assume many responsibilities, the most important of which is maintaining fixed religious principles and working hard to serve the people,” according to a statement released by Najaf’s office The cleric blamed those responsible for updating voters’ register for depriving a large number of people throughout the country from casting ballots.

Coming regional premier from PUK – Kurdistan’s PM

Kurdistan’s regional premier, Nejervan Barazani, said that the upcoming premier of Kurdistan regional cabinet will be from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) headed by the President of Iraq, Jalal Talabani. He explained that the parliamentary election in the region will take place on its scheduled date.

We remained key players in Iraq – SIIC

The Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC) said that it would remain a key player in Iraq, noting the voting process was conducted smoothly. “The Shaheed al-Mihrab list is expected to win 20-25 percent of local council seats in 14 provinces and much more than that in Baghdad,” according to a release issued by the SIIC and received by Aswat al-Iraq news agency. It pointed out that the election results “would set the stage for a wide range alliances and participation”.

British commander says ready to withdraw from Basra by July

Maj. Gen. Andy Salmon, the British commander of multinational forces in southeastern Iraq, said on Monday that his forces will end their missions by the end of May and will be ready to leave the country as of next July. He announced the completion of the joint Iraqi-British command building in Basra. Britain was part of the 2003 US-led coalition that invaded Iraq, and currently has about 4,100 troops stationed in the country, most of whom are based just outside the southern city of Basra.

Barazani leaves for Kuwait on Gulf tour

President of Iraq's Kurdistan region Massoud al-Barazani headed for Kuwait to discuss the political situation in Iraq and the region, according to an official source. Afterwards, Barazani will head for Qatar upon an official invitation from its leader. "Barazani will discuss several issues with regards to the relations between the federal government and the Kurdistan region, and those between the two countries. He will meet with the presidents of both countries and several government officials," according to Hussein. Barazani leads a delegation that includes several ministers and regional officials, Hussein added.

Crocker in Sulaimaniya

U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker arrived in Sulaimaniya city and met with the deputy prime minister, according to an official media source. "The two officials visited the American university in the city," according to the source. Crocker is expected to meet with President Jalal Talabani later today, the source added, providing no further details. Yesterday (Feb. 2), Crocker announced the end of his mission in Iraq, two years after he was appointed as the U.S. envoy in March 2007.

U.S. forces propose release of 1,500 detainees

The U.S. army in Iraq is currently consulting the Iraqi government about the release of 1,500 detainees, an army adviser said "We handed over a list of 1,500 detainees to the Iraqi government," Kareem al-Sayiab told. "The Iraqi government will decide who should be released, and who should be transferred to Iraqi detention centers in order to be sent to the Iraqi court," he said. Al-Sayiab did not mention when the list was handed over to the Iraqi side, but noted "In accordance with the pact, and in coordination with Iraq's government, 50 detainees will be released every day."

Parl. resumes sessions to elect speaker

The Iraqi Parliament on Wednesday will resume its sessions to elect its speaker, according to a parliamentary statement. "The sessions will be resumed tomorrow following a recess that began on January 19 th, when the parliament failed to elect a speaker," read the statement that was received. Mahmoud al-Mashhadani stepped down

as Parliament speaker following a heated argument with members of parliamentary committees, during which he allegedly used "offensive" language that prompted many parliamentarians to call for his resignation.

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Kurdistan seeks to boost ties with U.S. – representative

Representative of Kurdistan government to the U.S., Qabad Talabani, on Tuesday said that the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) seeks to bolster ties with the new U.S. administration. "Consultations are underway between the KRG, the new U.S. administration and the Congress to foster the political and economic relations between the region and the U.S.," Qabad told Aswat al-Iraq news agency, noting that Kurds try to affect the new administration's policy toward Iraq. Qabad said he held a meeting with the delegation of the U.S. chamber of commerce in Arbil to discuss ways to attract U.S. companies to the region and to convince them to carry out investment projects.

Iraq's government allocates $65 million for national interest – spokesman

The Council of Ministers decided during its 4th session to approve to add $29 million to the investment budget for the municipalities and public works ministry, and to allocate $65 million within the general budget for the national reconciliation project, the official spokesman for the Iraqi government said. "The Council of Ministers took ten decisions regarding different subjects, mainly the addition of $29 million to the investment budget for the municipalities and public works ministry," al-Dabagh said in a statement received by Aswat al-Iraq news agency.

Al-Maliki ready to form alliances in provincial councils

The Iraqi Premier Nouri al-Maliki said that his political bloc is ready to form political alliances in new provincial councils. "The principles of forming alliances, cooperation and distributing official posts will be our target, because that is what we believe in and work for," al-Maliki said from Najaf that he arrived earlier today. "I cannot comment on what this or that bloc has achieved, but I say that those who had participated in the electoral process have succeeded," he added after a meeting with Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Sistani that took more than an hour. "All participants should cooperate to make a better administration," he explained. "We say to all the blocs that would win the

provincial election that it is necessary to cooperate and form alliances to form the best provincial councils that gather us on the basis of partnership," he noted.

SOCIAL FRONT

Iran and Iraq working on new tourism deal

Iran and Iraq are negotiating a new memorandum of understanding that will substantially increase the number of Iranian pilgrims visiting the country. Tourism and Antiquities Minister Qahtan Abbas is leading the negotiations with a visiting Iranian delegation on a deal that will facilitate travel between the countries, according to Abdulzahra al-Talaqani, the ministry's spokesman. Talaqani said Iraq wanted to increase the number of its pilgrims visiting holy sites in Iraq to 5,000 a day from the current 1,500. The daily visits will be part of the package tours for pilgrimage purposes and do not include the flow of other Iranians who travel to Iraq mainly for business reasons. Talaqani said the deal was almost ready and the sides were keen to have it signed and implemented the soonest possible. Iranians are now almost the only tourists visiting Iraq and under the new arrangements nearly two million of them will be visiting every year. There is currently a flurry of construction in the religious cities of Karbala and Najaf, which are the main target of Iranian tourists. The construction activities are mainly centered on the building of new hotels and other tourist facilities to serve the pilgrims. Iranians can enter Iran via several border crossings and via almost daily flights from Tehran and other Iranian cities to the airports in both Baghdad and Najaf.

GEO STRATEGIC FRONT

ECONOMIC FRONT

Jordan grants facilities for Iraqi investors soon

The Jordanian government has prepared draft decisions to grant facilities for Iraqi investors to do business in Jordan in addition to facilities for Iraqi nationals in the kingdom in implementation of King Abdullah II of Jordan, according to the Jordanian interior ministry. "These facilities include smooth entry and exit, annual renewal of residence from the interior ministry, easy arrival of relatives – fathers, mothers and offspring – for Iraqi residents in Jordan and allowing Iraqis outside the kingdom to buy real estate there," Eid al-Fayez was quoted by Saturday's Jordanian newspaper Addustour as saying in statements. King Abdullah II had given instructions to the Jordanian authorities on January 12, 2009 to facilitate entry and residence of Iraqis in the kingdom.

45 % of Sulaimaniya's budget for 41 projects

Sulaimaniya's provincial council allocated 45 percent of the province's 2009 budget to execute 41 different projects, most of them related to agricultural development, at Halabcha suburb and

Horaman area. "This support comes within the frame of Kurdistan regional government's attempts to develop farming in the region," a release issued by the national center for media and received quoted Hassan Sheikh Abdullah, a member of Sulaimaniya's provincial council, as saying.

Global crisis attracts capital to Iraq – INIC

An Iraqi investment official said the repercussions of the global financial crisis has functioned as a catalyst to attract foreign capital to the local market, adding a plenary symposium will be held on investment in the country on February 22. "The Iraq National Investment Commission has set Feb. 22 as a date for an event that would bring members and governors together to discuss investment in the provinces and diagnose the problems that delayed several development projects and programs," Abdullah al-Bandar, an INIC advisor, told. He pointed out that major global firms specialized in construction and contracting works would be attracted to work on the local market.

U.S. forces hand over al-Adl mall to Trade Ministry

The Shopping Centers Company received al-Adl Shopping Center from the U.S. forces that had been using it as a base, the Iraqi Ministry of Trade said in a release on Tuesday, and that measures would be taken to reopen the mall to allow Iraqi customers to do their shopping at subsidized prices. "The Iraqi flag was raised over the mall," said the release that was received. U.S. forces deployed in Baghdad had handed over another mall, al-Shaab Shopping Center, to the Trade Ministry on Dec. 5, 2008.

Iraq's oil exports up by 2 million barrels in Jan.

The Iraqi Ministry of Oil achieved an increase in the country's oil exports of more than two million barrels in Jan. 2009, compared to Dec. 2008, the ministry's media spokesperson said. "In Jan. 2009, Iraq exported 58.621 million barrels, with an average of 891 thousand barrels per day (bpd)," Assim Jihad told Aswat al-Iraq news agency.

Trade ministry refuses to receive cooking oil from industry ministry

The Iraqi Ministry of Trade refused to receive five thousand tons of cooking oil from the Ministry of Industry, a source from the ministry said. "This quantity of cooking oil was imported from Turkey, a matter that contradicts the contract between the two ministries," Qaiss Mohammed Naseeb, director general of the State company for food stuff commerce, told. "The agreement stipulates that the quantity should be produced locally," he said.

Deputy premier discusses oilfields with French company

Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Rafie al-Issawi discussed means of developing oilfields with the general director of the French oil company Total S.A. "Issawi has been acquainted

with the plans set out by the company in the fields of oil exploration and oilfield development," according to a statement released by Issawi's office. "The two sides discussed means of expanding cooperation in oil industry…," the statement noted. Total S.A. is an oil company headquartered in Paris, France, and one of the six "Supermajor" oil companies in the world. Its businesses cover the entire oil and gas chain, from crude oil and natural gas exploration and production to power generation, transportation, refining, petroleum product marketing, and international crude oil and product trading. Total is also a large-scale chemicals manufacturer.

Japanese firms face fierce competition in Iraq

The Japanese ambassador in Iraq said that his country is facing tough competition from U.S. and European companies seeking to invest in Iraq. The remark was made during his meeting with a number of Iraqi editors-in-chief and media directors, including the editor-in-chief of Aswat al-Iraq news agency, in the capital Baghdad. "As of this week, Japanese companies have begun to arrive in Iraq to explore investment potentials in large oil and electricity projects," the Japanese envoy said.

Electricity ministry to warn Russian firm

The Iraqi ministry of electricity will send a final warning to the Russian company Technoprom Export for failing to refurbish two steam-powered electricity units at al-Hartha power plant in Basra, according to a ministry release. "The contract would be cancelled if the company failed to deliver on its pledges," read the release that was received by Aswat al-Iraq news agency. Currently only two out of four units that make up al-Hartha power plant are in operation while the two other units have been out of service since 1991.

$25 billion surplus staves off financial crisis – Iraqi minister

The hard cash the Finance Ministry had stashed away when oil prices were high has protected Iraq from the financial crisis that has shaken the world, Fianance Minister Baqer al-Zubaidi said. According to the minister, the government has built up a surplus of $25 billion from oil sales. The surplus was possible due to high oil prices on international markets and it will be used to sustain the government's economic policies as prices have plummeted recently. The government has slashed its estimate for 2009 oil revenues but the decline, the minister said, could be compensated. The minister made the remarks as he spoke at an international monetary conference in Baghdad held to lure foreign banks to open branches in the country. Zubaidi said his ministry was prepared to boost volume of credits to the private sector to $4 billion from $2 billion under Central Bank supervision. The Central Bank Governor Sinan al-Shabibi said he has asked numerous foreign banks to start up businesses in Iraq on their own or in cooperation with local banks. International banks have declined such calls in the past, citing security reasons. But officials hope that the relative security Iraq now enjoys and the fact that

the latest elections have proceeded without violence would lure foreigner investors to the country.

PALESTINE AND ISRAEL

POLITICAL FRONT

Hamas negotiators return empty-handed from Cairo talks

Hamas negotiators will be returning to Gaza with no ceasefire agreement reached, Hamas' spokesman in Gaza said. In a statement to media outlets, spokesman Fawzi Barhoum said that the Israeli offer for ceasefire, which was received by Egyptian mediators, connects the case of captured soldier Gil'ad Shalit with partial reopening of the border crossings. Such an Israeli offer does not meet the minimum demands by Hamas, mainly complete reopening of all crossings. "We have not received any guarantees for perpetuating any understandings, therefore, we have submitted a number of inquiries to the Egyptian side regarding the reopening of crossings as well as a prisoner swap deal" Barhoum added . The Hamas spokesman also wondered as to what it means to reopen 70 percent of Gaza's crossings, and what materials that Israel would disallow entry of. As for reopening the Rafah crossing terminal in accordance with the crossing terminal operations agreement of 2005, Barhoum stated that the matter is still under discussion.

Candidate for Israeli Prime Minister: No return of stolen Palestinian land

Benjamin Netanyahu, the leading candidate for Israeli Prime Minister, stated that no land should be returned to the Palestinian people. Referring to commitments made by outgoing Prime Minister Ehud Olmert during US-led peace negotiations, Netanyahu stated, "I will not keep Olmert's commitments to withdraw, and I won't evacuate settlements." Israeli civilians have moved into settlements, or colonies, on Palestinian land in record numbers over the last fifteen years. The settlement expansion, in direct violation of the 1993 Oslo Agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, has made further peace talks impossible. Palestinians have demanded the dismantling of the settlements in order to make a viable Palestinian state possible. But, Israeli immigrants have continued to move into illegal developments on stolen Palestinian land, with the full approval of the Israeli government. During his last days in office, outgoing Prime Minister Ehud Olmert stated that the settlements would have to be evacuated for peace to be possible. But even under Olmert, settlements continued to expand. According to the Israeli paper Ha'aretz, “Defence minister Ehud Barak had agreed to approve a new settlement in return for the evacuation of Migron, a settlement of 45 families which even the Israeli government

regards as illegal. Evidence of the approval emerged in an affidavit submitted on Monday to the Israeli high court. A plan is being considered for 1,400 housing units at the new settlement. In January last year, Olmert committed himself to evacuating settlers from Migron within six months, though it now appears that no one will leave the settlement for at least another two or three years." Netanyahu's main opponent in the February 17th elections, Tzipi Livni, has also stated that she believes evacuation of the settlements would be necessary for peace.

Mash'al: we are working towards a political organization that represents all Palestinians

Khaled Mash'al, head of Hamas' political bureau, said last night that the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in its current situation does not represent all Palestinians. The Hamas leader made his comments during a meeting in the Qatari capital of Doha at a conference called "celebrating the Gaza victory". He added that the PLO serves to divide instead of reconcile. Moreover, he announced that he is working to reconstruct the factional body into what can be in called, by today's terms, "the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people." During his speech, the Hamas leader sent a message to George Mitchell, the newly appointed US envoy to the Middle East, saying that political, security and military efforts would fail if the resistance groups are ignored. Regarding the Palestinian unity dialogue, Mash'al said that talks are being planned now through the Cairo meetings. He noted the importance of self-imposition by the deferent factions and the outside agendas. At the end of his speech, Mash'el gave the stage to Mohammad Nazzal, Hamas political bureau member. At first, Nazzal thanked Mauritania and Qatar for the moral and financial support to the people of the Gaza Strip. He noted that the money that has been donated will reach those who desperately need it. Nazzal finalized his speech by accusing some Palestinian and Arab parties of giving a cover to Israel's latest attack on Gaza. "I can confirm that there are Palestinian parties who knew of an impending strike, and also there is the involvement of the Arab parties before the outbreak."

Palestinian president Abbas: No dialogue with those who reject PLO

Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas stated on Sunday that he will not initiate any dialogue with those who reject the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), calling for all concerned Palestinian parties to recognize the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. During a press briefing in Cairo, where Abbas is holding talks with top Egyptian officials, the president blamed other Palestinian parties for what he described as gambling the Palestinian people's future and aspirations, naming no body. He also accused those parties of adopting external agendas that are different from the PLO's, saying that Egypt remains the main destination that defends Palestine and the Palestinian people. The Palestinian president turned down an invitation to last Friday's Qattar-hosted Arab emergency summit meeting over the

situation in Gaza. The meeting was attended by Khaled Mah'al, the exiled political leader of Abbas's rival Hamas party.

Hamas: The idea to form factional reference body does not obliterate PLO

Hamas spokesperson in Gaza, Fawzi Barhoum, stated that a plan to install a factional reference body does not derogate the Palestine Liberation Organization, but rather allows other factions to be represented in the Palestinian struggle. Barhoum confirmed that his party's call for a body that represents Palestinians inside and outside the Palestinian homeland, came at a time when many Palestinian resistance factions are not represented in the PLO. Barhoum criticized Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas for what Barhoum considered Abbas's attempts to foil all efforts aimed at a reconcilliation between Hamas and the Fatah party of Abbas. in Cairo, Abbas stated that he will not initiate any dialogue with 'those who reject the PLO"." The Palestinian president does not wish a successful national Palestinian dialogue, but rather wants to commit Hamas to external agendas that have undermined the Palestinian people's choice", the Hamas spokesperson said.

The Abbas-chaired Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) signed peace accords with Israel in 1993. Since coming to power after parliamentary elections in 2006, Hamas shunned peace with Israel until Israel ends its occupation of the Gaza Strip, West Bank and East Jerusalem. Also, the party has called for reforming the PLO in light of the election's results.

Shoe hits Israeli ambassador to Sweden

A shoe was thrown at Israel's ambassador to Sweden, Mr. Benny Dagan, when he was giving a speech at Stockholm University on Thursday . It was followed by two books and a note pad, all hitting the severely embarrassed ambassador. The two protesters, a young woman and a young man, shouted "Murderers!" and "Intifada!" while pelting Dagan with the objects. They are currently under arrest and charged with assault and public disturbance. The lecture was organized by the Foreign policy association at Stockholm University. The ambassador was supposed to talk about the upcoming elections in Israel, but turned quickly to issues of Hamas and Iran, and developed a lengthy defence for Israel 's recent actions in the Gaza Strip. Some 20 minutes into the lecture, a woman stood up in the audience, threw a red shoe at the ambassador and shouted "Murderers!" The shoe hit Dagan in his stomach. Another protester then joined in and hurled two books and a note pad. Dagan was dumbstruck and paralyzed, but returned to his lecture shortly after a few minutes – only to face shouts and other verbal protests from the audience. The meeting ended in chaos, while the two protestors were taken to custody. The boycott movement in Sweden has gained momentum during the last weeks,

not the least since Veolia lost its Stockholm metro contract, worth some 3.5 billion euro a year, after a long campaign against the company's notorious involvement in the Jerusalem tram project. The movement is now taking aim at the Davis Cup tennis match between Sweden and Israel scheduled in Malmö from the 6th to the 8th of March 2009.

Israeli elections; an open season for racism

As different political parties are heating up the debate for the upcoming general elections in Israel, several right wing parties started competing on which party carries more hatred towards the Arabs and Palestinians, and which party is capable of expelling them once and for all. Now, such debates are not something new in Israel, a state founded by expelling the indigenous Palestinians from their lands by carrying one massacre after the other, even years before Israel was officially established. But right now, in this new world order, racism against the Arabs is being used by some right wing factions in Israel as a means to win more seats in the upcoming elections. The Israeli right wing National Union party, one of the strongest parties among Jewish settlers in the West Bank, proposed an initiative to fight the Arabs and Palestinians by expelling them to Venezuela. The party said that the Venezuelan president, Hugo Chavez, proved to be the political leader who is very loyal to the Palestinians "therefore, Arabs who do not accept to be transferred to the Arab world, will be comfortable in Venezuela, it will be better for them and more comfortable for us". Meanwhile, Uzi Landau, a former Likud member of Knesset, and currently number 2 on the candidate list of the Yisrael Bettino extremist right wing party, said that calls for transferring the Arabs are not only part of an elections campaign, and added that the "Jewish public in Israel knows this fact and is waiting for a courageous leadership that does not fear to be labeled as racist". Landau claimed that most of the Arabs in Israel are loyal to the country but their political leaders "are running a war against Israel". He added that this leadership might form "terrorist cells that would turn life in Israel into a living hell". As a "solution", he said that every Arab citizen in Israel must prove his loyalty to the Jewish state, must accept Israel as a "Jewish Democratic State" and that this acceptance would be the condition to obtaining Israeli citizenship. Of course, this statement is among the most racist statements uttered by Israeli leaders as it ignored the basic fact that Israel as a state was founded by expelling and killing the indigenous native inhabitants of the land; the Palestinians people. Now, extreme right wing parties in Israel are proposing a new law that should be implemented in Israel. This law obliges any Israeli citizen to join the military on his/her eighteenth birthday. The residents must vow to respect and honor the Israeli flag, the Israeli national anthem and recognize Israel as a Jewish democratic state. Anyone who rejects to do so would not be allowed to participate in the elections, either as a candidate or as a voter. Similarities in history are not so shocking, and how the United States, the best friend and ally to Israel, was formed on the Indian land after lynching and massacring the natives, and taking their lands away from them. Avigdor Lieberman, head of the Yisrael Betinu Party, and a current candidate for Prime Minister, is one of the Israeli right wing leaders who are using their outrageous hatred towards Arabs and Palestinians in political speeches and campaigns.

Lieberman could be an embarrassment to Israel not because of his racist, anti-Palestinian, Anti-Arab statements, not because of his statements to expel them from their land, but because he is an Israeli official, a member of Knesset who clearly states the Israeli policies of hostility and hatred against the Arabs. Uzi Landau, a former member of the Likud Party, and the second on the list of Yisrael Beteinu (Israel Our Home) Party, said that these statements are not part of a media campaign, and added that the Jewish public in Israel believes in this, and is demanding a courageous leadership to express those ideas without fearing to be labeled at racist. He even accused Arab leaders in Israel, including Arab members of Knesset, of inciting the Arab public to run a war against Israel, and added that he believes that those leaders could form "terrorist cells that would transform living in Israel into a living hell". The fourth candidate of the party, Michael Bin-Ary, also welcomed the idea of expelling the Arabs and said that "everybody knows that having 1.5 million Arabs in Israel is a serious problem". Yisrael Beteinu Party decided to send one of its most radical members, Barock Merzil, to represent it in the Arab town of Um Al Fahim. Arab parties in the town considered this decision as provocation. The leftist Meretz Party demanded Israel to bar Merzil from heading to Um Al Fahim as his presence could cause Jewish-Arab clashes in the city and in different parts of Israel. Currently, the main rivals in the elections, especially the Kadima and the Likud parties, are running their media campaign by running a warfare. Senior Israeli leaders are competing among them on who is going to strike the Gaza Strip harder, who will force Hamas out of power and who will mobile the troops for further offensives. They are also competing on keeping the largest settlement blocs in the occupied West Bank, and on expanding them. They compete on which leader would be the one who "achieves peace with the Palestinians and Syria without withdrawing from most of the occupied territories".

SECURITY FRONT

Palestinian President: Israel must be held responsible for war crimes

The Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas told the European Parliament that the Israeli government committed war crimes in its three-week assault on Gaza, and must be held responsible. Abbas, who represents the Fatah party, is favored by Israeli officials to negotiate on behalf of the Palestinian people. His government, approved by the Israeli government, holds power over the Israeli-occupied Palestinian population in the West Bank. But the Israeli-occupied Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip remain steadfast in their support of the elected government of the Palestinian people, the Hamas party.

In a statement to the European Parliament, Abbas attempted to garner support for a Palestinian unity government, which would be comprised of both his unelected appointed officials, and the elected government of the Hamas party. He encouraged European nations to take a more active role in the region, including providing aid and support for the rebuilding of the ravaged Gaza Strip, and pressuring Israel to end its military occupation and attacks on the Palestinian people.

Israeli warplanes raid Gaza-Egypt border

Israeli warplanes attacked afternoon the Gaza-Egypt border, hitting a number targets; no causalities were reported. Witnesses said that at least one missile landed in the area, creating a very loud explosion. The Israeli attack also hit a Hamas post in the nearby southern Gaza town of Khan Younis, with no causalities reported. Yesterday, Israeli warplanes dropped leaflets on the border area, warning residents to leave ahead of the bombardment.

Barak suggests tunnel to link Gaza with the West Bank

In a meeting with students at Ben-Gurion University, Israeli Defense Minister, Ehud Barak, suggested digging a tunnel that would link the Gaza Strip with the West Bank in order to create what he described as "geographical contiguity". The suggested tunnel would be 48 kilometers and will remain under Israeli control while the Palestinian Authority would control the traffic inside it. He added that the cost of such a tunnel would be between 2 and 3 billion USD, and added that this cost is reasonable. His statements came as part of his campaign for Prime Minister's office in the upcoming Israeli elections. The Labor Party Chairman attacked Kadima party and said that Kadima is incapable of conducting internal changes, and cannot perform changes in the state. He added that peace in the region can only be reached from a position of power, and that the Palestinians must understand that Israeli cannot be defeated "by military and terror attacks", according to Barak. Barak slammed the Kadima party, and said that one of its senior members, Vice Prime Minister Haim Ramon, is involved in "embarrassing offenses and was convicted in a court of law, yet he did not appeal the conviction and asked the court to investigate those who interrogated him", Israeli Ynet News reported.

Olmert, Barak, considering further strikes in Gaza

Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, and his Defense Minister, Ehud Barak, stated that they intend to strike hard against Hamas in the Gaza Strip in retaliation to what they described as homemade shell-fired into nearby Israeli towns. Olmert said that Israel will retaliate "against any provocation", even if the "provocation" is limited, and that the country will not allow Gaza gunmen to keep firing homemade shells into Israel. The statements of Olmert came as he toured Akka Arab town in the north of the country. He added that "calm did not prevail in the south, but it will happen no matter what". Meanwhile, Ehud Barak stated that if Israel realizes that there is no other alternative, it will strike Hamas when and how "the Jewish state sees fit". He added that this strike would be harsher and more devestating than any other previous strike. Barak also said that Hamas is interested in calm in the region, but the firing of homemade shells has become a reality that cannot be ignored. The statements of Barak came as he toured the northern borders.

Israeli Authorities demolish a Palestinian owned garage and warehouse in Jerusalem

The Israeli municipality of Jerusalem demolished a Palestinian owned bus garage and a warehouse for construction materials. The bus garage is owned by the Abu Dayah family, a Palestinian family in Jerusalem that runs a tourism bus company. The garage is located just outside the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem. Meanwhile, the warehouse that houses construction materials is owned by another Palestinian family, and is located near the garage, local sources reported. The sources added that the Israeli Army surrounded the area before bulldozers demolished the two facilities and left. The municipality stated that the facilities have been built without the needed permission and documentation. Since Israel occupied the city of Jerusalem in 1967, Palestinian residents have rarely been given permits to build homes. Meanwhile, Israel continue to build and expand Jewish-only illegal settlements in and around Jerusalem, and all throughout the West Bank, on Palestinian-owned lands. With the two structures demolished today, the number of Palestinian owned homes and other facilities that have been demolished by Israel since the beginning of this year have reached seven. Palestinian officials in Jerusalem say that there are plans to demolish many more Palestinian-owned homes in East Jerusalem this year.

GEO STRATEGIC FRONT

US Congress introduces bill to punish UNRWA

A bill has been introduced in Congress criticizing the work of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency in Gaza. The bill accuses the Agency of providing support to so-called 'terrorists' in the Gaza Strip. Laila al Quttami, of the Arab American Anti-Discrimination Committee, says that this bill is actually an attempt to punish the Agency for speaking out against the Israeli invasion of Gaza last month. The committee has called on Congress to vote against Congressional Resolution 29, and vote instead for HR 66, which would provide much-needed humanitarian aid to the Palestinian people. Some US groups have even called on President Obama to dispatch the Navy's Hospital ship, the USNS Mercy, to help provide medical care to the besieged population of Gaza.

South African dockworkers refuse to off-load Israeli goods

South African dock workers have refused to off-load a ship full of products from Israel. This action follows a decision by the South African Trade Unions Congess to engage in boycott and sanctions against what they call apartheid in Israel. The action is part of a week of protests and

rallies in South Africa, including union protests in front of the South African Zionist Federation, and dock blockades. The Congress of South African Trade Unions was a leader in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. They make a comparison between the apartheid they suffered in South Africa and the Israeli policies of discrimination and occupation of the Palestinian people. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, another leading anti-apartheid figure in South Africa, has also made this comparison. He said that what is happening to the Palestinians at the hands of the Israeli government and military is worse than what happened to native Africans in South Africa under apartheid.

UN chief meets Egyptian president for talks over Gaza

The UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, met with President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt for talks regarding the Israeli attacks on Gaza. Ban Ki-moon's visit to Egypt comes as part of a tour he is making in the region aimed at ending the Israeli attack on Gaza. Ban Ki-moon arrived in the Egyptian capital Cairo at the start of a regional tour aimed at ending Israel's assault on the Gaza Strip. The UN Secretary General will meet leaders in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Turkey during his tour.

UN sources say that Ban Ki-moon is expected to discuss the reconstruction in Gaza after the violence ends, an effort the United Nations is expected to lead. The UN chief said that he would send an assessment team to determine the extent of the damage and of humanitarian needs following a ceasefire. The death toll in Gaza today has reached 997 due to the 19 day long Israeli attack on Gaza. Meanwhile, Israel says that 10 soldiers and three civilians have been killed by Palestinian fire. The Israeli offensive on the Gaza Strip continues despite diplomatic efforts and United Nations Security Council calling for an immediate, durable and fully respected ceasefire. Israel has rejected the call, describing it as unworkable. Outgoing Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said that Israel has never agreed to let an external body to decide for Israel what to do, and stressed that the Israeli military will continue its operations in the Gaza Strip. On the other hand, Hamas said that the UNSC resolution does not meet Palestinian demands of ending the siege on the Gaza Strip and opening the border crossings. UN resolution 1860, which passed last week with a majority of 14 votes, with the United States abstaining from voting, did not add to the Egyptian-French initiative calling for immediate ceasefire in the Gaza Strip.

Hamas: We accepted an Egyptian invitation for talks in Cairo

A high-ranking Hamas official confirmed that his movement has accepted an Egyptian invitation for cease-fire talks in Cairo. Osama Hamdan, member of Hamas' politcal buro said in Damascus that Hamas will send a delegation to Cairo soon for talks in a bid to reach a cease-fire. Hamdan

also said that Israel has failed to stop the Palestinian resistance in the Gaza Strip, adding that the resistance is firing home-made shells at Israel on a scheduled manner. Earlier, the UN Security Council had failed to reach a Libyan-proposed cease-fire resolution in Gaza, as the US rejected the proposal. Arab leaders expressed dissatisfaction. Meanwhile, Europe has sent diplomats to boost the effort. So far, a cease-fire in the Gaza Strip seems to be far from being reached after ten days of the Israeli offensive against the Gaza Strip. The official international attitude seems to be very diluted, as the European Union said the Israeli attacks on Gaza are defensive rather than offensive.Yet, the Europeans continue to push for a cease-fire in the Gaza Strip. For this purpose, two senior European officials headed to the area in order to promote a cease-fire agreement. Karl Schwarzenberg, the foreign minister of the Czech Republic, which took over the European Union presidency from France on Thursday, led a delegation to the region Meanwhile, President Nicolas Sarkozy of France arrived in Egypt, kicking off his Middle East tour to push for a cease-fire. He is to meet with President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert of Israel and the Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas, and he will also hold talks with Syrian and Lebanese leaders. Local observers have said that the delay in reaching a cease-fire and a United Nations Security Council resolution to end the Israeli attacks on Gaza is deliberate, in order to give more time for Israel to reach its goals declared for the military offensive on the coastal region.

US is Looking to Work with all the Parties, Says Clinton Secretary of State: Hamas must renounce violence

US Hillary Clinton said that the US is looking to work with all parties in the conflict but reiterated the US' conditions for dialogue with Hamas. Clinton also said she would send Mitchell back to the region after being briefed by him on his return from an initial visit to the Middle East. Mitchell did not meet with Hamas or visit Gaza. Last week international envoy Tony Blair said that Hamas should be included in the peace process, possibly signaling an easing of the international community's embargo against the movement. "I do think it is important that we find a way of bringing Hamas into this process, but it can only be done if Hamas are prepared to do it on the right terms," he told the Times of London.

President Abbas Meets Sarkozy in Paris Leaders Discuss Truce, Gaza Reconstruction

President Mahmoud Abbas in France expressed hopes for reaching a reconciliation agreement with the Hamas movement. At the same time, President Abbas met with French President Nicolas Sarkozy at a donor's conference in Paris, where he said the Palestinian Authority would welcome Hamas into a unity government—but had no intention of dismantling the Palestine Liberation Organization to accommodate the movement. At a news conference following his talks with the French leader, Abbas called for reconciliation and urged Hamas and Israel to cement fragile ceasefires declared earlier in January. He applauded Egypt's efforts on behalf of peace between the arch rivals. But

the president noted tensions over the deal, blaming “Israeli aggression” that he said “is still ongoing.” Abbas is touring Europe in support of the massive reconstruction effort for the Gaza Strip, as well as urging EU governments to approve negotiations with all factions, including Hamas, which he said has legitimate intentions for the Palestinians, including opening crossings and ending the 18-month blockade on the Gaza Strip. According to a spokesperson for the president, renewed efforts on the part of Egypt have improved the possibility of reaching a long-term truce with Israel. The Abbas aide, Nabil Abu Rdeinah, said the Palestinian and French presidents discussed reconstructing Gaza, particularly France’s role in improving life there.

President Abbas Heads to Cairo Truce, Unity on Top of Visit’s Agendas

President Mahmoud Abbas cut a planned European visit and headed quickly to Cairo because serious progress was made on the ceasefire talks, observers say. Rumors on Abbas’ decision say there is agreement on a possible temporary ceasefire draft that includes opening crossings and preparations to tackle other profiles, especially Palestinian conciliation. The official Palestinian news agency, Wafa, quoted Abbas aide Nabil Abu Rdainah as saying the Palestinian president would arrive in Cairo to "follow up the efforts to strengthen the (Gaza) ceasefire and national reconciliation." Hamas officials in Cairo are set to meet with Egyptian mediators on Sunday. Abbas will meet Egyptian officials the following day. Egypt , Saudi Arabia and the European Union see Palestinian reconciliation as one of the keys to progress towards an end to the Israeli-Egyptian blockade of Gaza and towards a possible resumption of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

SYRIA

POLITICAL FRONT

Cabinet listens to political review by Premier Ottri

Syrian Cabinet listened to a comprehensive review by Prime Minister Mohammad Naji Ottri on political and developmental issues discussed in the meeting of the National Progressive Front. "The strength of our economy and our national unity under the leadership of President Bashar al-Assad constitutes the base of Syria's powerfulness and to enhance its pivotal and active role on regional and international levels," Premier Ottri said. He called on the ministries and the affiliated directorates to intensify efforts to execute developmental programs and plans in order to face challenges to which the nation is exposed. Later, the Cabinet adopted a number of decisions on industry, customs, export and import, and approved a draft law on ratifying agreements signed between the Syrian government and the Islamic Development Bank which stipulates for supplying equipment for the gas station in the central region.

President al-Assad Presides Over PNF Meeting, Underlines Israel's Failure in Gaza

President Bashar al-Assad presided over a meeting for the Central Leadership of the Progressive National Front, PNF, during which he reviewed the most prominent political developments witnessed by the Arab region in the past period which was characterized by dangerous challenges to the Arab nation , and to its national causes , on top of which the Palestinian cause. President al-Assad stressed that in spite of atrocities and brutality of the Israeli aggression on the Palestinian people and of what was used by the Israeli occupation troops of killing and destruction means , yet they failed to achieve their goals in directing a fatal blow to the resistance ,and in imposing their will on the Palestinian people in Gaza Strip. The president added that the Palestinian people had managed by their steadfastness and brave resistance , to foil all political attempts that accompanied this aggression which aimed at imposition of capitulative solutions on the Arabs. In connection with the latest developments and events that took place in the Arab arena, the president stressed Syria's opening to all the efforts whereby Arab solidarity can be achieved , and joint Arab action can be fortified for the protection of the Arab interests , cementing the factors of strength of the Arab nation , and contributing to standing up against the Zionist settlement project. On the local level, the president reviewed the features of the domestic situation and the developmental steps currently being taken in the country for facing the economic crisis that has plagued the world. President al-Assad listened to the interventions and questions forwarded by the members of PNF Central Leadership , which dealt with various political, economic and service affairs .

Interior Minister Discusses with Koman Preparations for Holding Arab Interior Ministers Council in Beirut

The meeting between Interior Minister , Bassam Abdul-Majeed , and Secretary General of the Arab Interior Ministers Council, Moammed Ali Koman , dealt with the current preparations for holding 26th session of the council scheduled to be held in Beirut next month. After reviewing what has been done so far by the specialized committees of the council general secretariat , Koman expressed appreciation for the Syrian Interior Ministry's role for the success of the council by its full commitment to the implementation of all recommendations and decisions issued by the council. For his part , Minister Abdul-Majeed stressed the care of the Interior Ministry for carrying out the decisions of the council general secretariat , and for everything that can boost Arab joint security cooperation .

ECONOMIC FRONT

GEO STRATEGIC FRONT

Ottri during Meeting with Volunteer Doctors Heading for Gaza: Syria Supports the People of Gaza and their Resilience

Prime Minister Mohammad Naji Ottri affirmed on Sunday that Syria under the leadership of President Bashar al-Assad is committed to national and patriotic stances and committed to supporting the will of resilience and resistance to confront the challenges facing the Arab nation. During his meeting with the second group of doctors who volunteered to go to Gaza, Ottri stressed that Syria stands by the people of Gaza and that Syria is ready to provide all kinds of support to bolster their resilience in the face of the Israeli war machine. He pointed out that the doctors' initiative expresses the Syrian people's support of their brethren in Gaza, urging the doctors to exert all efforts to provide medical care to the injured people in Gaza. The meeting was attended by State Minister for the Affairs of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent Dr. Bashar al-Shaar and Chief of Doctors Syndicate Dr. Ahmad Qasem.

Israeli unfair verdicts against two Syrian captives are null and void

Committee of Supporting the Syrian freed captives and the detainees at the Israeli prisons on Sunday condemned the unfair verdict issued by the Israeli occupation court against two Syrian captives, Syrian TV Reporter Atta Allah Farhat and Chairman of the Apple marketing commission in Golan Yousef Shams. "The verdicts are null and void, they come in contradiction with international laws and conventions," a statement by the Committee said, appealing to the international community, civil societies and human rights organizations to press Israel to halt those unfair verdicts and release all Syrian captives from the Israeli prisons. The Israeli occupation court today sentenced Farhat with 6 years in prison, 3 years of them as 'stay of execution' and a financial penalty $ 6000, and sentenced Mr. Shams with 4 years in prison and a penalty of $ 12000 accusing them with "contacting with the homeland."

President al-Assad Accepts Credentials of Indian Ambassador in Damascus

President Bashar al-Assad accepted the credentials of India's new ambassador to Syria. Then, President al-Assad met with the ambassador and wished him success in his missions. The ceremony was attended by Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem, Minister of Presidential Affairs Ghassan Laham and Secretary of the Presidency of the republic Mansour Azzam.

President al-Assad Sends a Congratulation Cable to Sri Lankan President on Occasion of National Day

President Bashar al-Assad sent a congratulation cable to President of Sri Lanka Mahinda Rajapaksa on occasion of Sri Lanka's national day. In his cable, President al-Assad expressed on behalf of the Syrian people and that of himself the heartfelt congratulations and best wishes to President Rajapaksa and friendly people of Sri Lanka.

Kaddah Reviews Bilateral Cooperation with a Venezuelan Delegation

Deputy Chairman of the Progressive National Front, PNF, Suleiman Kaddah on Wednesday reviewed with a Venezuelan parliamentary delegation , headed by a deputy at the Venezuelan

National Assembly , Adel Saghir , the standing bilateral relations of cooperation and friendship between the two countries and ways of boosting them further. During the meeting , the two sides exchanged view points on the developments in the region and in the world, and the role of the two countries in facing the policy of hegemony, and aggression. Kadda praised friendly Venezuela's honorable stances with regard to the Israeli brutal aggression on Gaza particularly the leading step of severing diplomatic relations with the Israeli entity. For his part Saghir praised Syria's stances of principle under the leadership of President Bashar al-Assad , reiterating his country's support to the Palestinian people's right to struggle for the liberation of land , restoration of usurped rights , and the establishment of their independent state with Jerusalem as its capital.

Al-Abrash Discusses Bilateral Relations with Venezuelan Parliamentary Delegation

Speaker of the People's Assembly Dr. Mahmoud al-Abrash discussed on Wednesday with Venezuelan MP Adel al-Saghir Syrian-Venezuelan parliamentary relations and the importance of bolstering them to serve the two friendly peoples and their interests. Al-Abrash thanked the Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez for his brave stances regarding regional issues, particularly during the Israeli aggression on Gaza. He affirmed that these stances were honorable and extended a great service to public opinion, saying "what your country offered will not be forgotten." In turn, al-Saghir pointed out that the victory of the resistance in Gaza uncovered the falsity of Israeli allegations that attempted to portray Israel as the victim for years. He added that the international institutes are no longer meeting the needs of the new situation, which calls for establishing new institutes to create a unified international stance regarding global issues.

Sweid underlines important role of Syrian and Venezuelan MPs to uncover Israeli crimes

Minister of Expatriates Joseph Sweid underlined the importance of coordination and cooperation between MPs in Syria and Venezuela to uncover the Israeli crimes in Gaza and bring the Israeli war criminals into justice. The Minister, meeting a Venezuelan parliamentary delegation headed by Imad Saab, praised the honorable stances of Venezuela and its rejection of the Israeli brutal aggression on the Palestinian civilians. Members of the visiting delegation hailed Syria's principled syances under the leadership of President Bashar al-Assad and its important role, underlining their support of the Arab just causes.

Al-Moallem Receives Credentials of Iraqi Ambassador to Syria

Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem received the credentials of Dr. Alaa Hussein al-Jawadi as the Iraqi Ambassador to Syria. Talks during the meeting dealt with bilateral relations and means for bolstering and developing them in various fields to benefit the two countries and their peoples.

Lutfi Discusses Bilateral Relations with Chairman of Belgian-Syrian Businessmen Council

Minister of Economy and Trade Dr. Amer Housni Lutfi discussed with a Belgian economic delegation headed by Chairman of the Belgian-Syrian Businessmen Council Philip Swinnen means of bolstering cooperation between the two countries in economic, commercial and investment fields. Minister Lutfi called on Belgian businessmen to invest in Syria due to its investment atmosphere that achieves high added values, reviewing the state of Syrian economy and the steps taken by the government and the legislations that were issued to encourage investment and restructure Syrian economy to keep up with global economic changes. He also expressed desire for benefiting from the Belgian side's experience in developing business in some economic, industrial and tourism sections. For his part, Swinnen affirmed the Belgian side's desire to boost cooperation with Syria and Syrian businessmen, pointing out to the achievements of Syrian he economy he witnessed during his visit. The two sides concluded the meeting by agreeing to boost cooperation and coordination to serve the mutual economic interests of the two countries.

Syria Condemns the Israeli Navy Piracy Against Lebanese Fraternity Ship

A Syrian Foreign Ministry Official Source strongly condemned the Israeli navy piracy against Lebanese Fraternity Ship which has been loaded with humanitarian relieve aid for the besieged Palestinian people in Gaza. The source added in a statement to SANA: "Syria holds Israel fully responsible for the safety of the ship , its crew , and all passengers , and demands the international community and all bodies concerned with humanitarian affairs, to condemn this piracy , to act immediately for the release of all the detainees , to commit Israel to allow the Palestinian people access to the humanitarian aid on board the ship.

Minister of Information Underlines Distinguished Syrian-Venezuelan Relations

Minister of Information Dr. Mohsen Bilal affirmed during his meeting with a Venezuelan parliamentary delegation headed by Member of the National Assembly of Venezuela Adel al-Saghir the importance of MPs and mass media in bolstering cooperation, extending bridges and communicating among countries and peoples. During the meeting, Minister Bilal thanked Venezuela's president, government and people for their stances in support of peoples' rights and their condemnation of aggression and occupation, particularly Venezuela's recent stance during the Israelei aggression on Gaza Strip. Dr. Bilal underlined the distinguished relations between Syria and Venezuela, stressing the need for bolstering and developing them in various fields, particularly the fields of media.

For his part, al-Saghir affirmed the importance of Syria's role in confronting policies of hegemony, tyranny and aggression, expressing his country's support of peoples' right to struggle to restore their rights, including Syria's right to restore the occupied Syrian Golan and the Palestinian people's to fight occupation until their rights are restored.

President al-Assad Receives a Verbal Message from Sultan Qaboos bin Said

President Bashar al-Assad received this morning a verbal message from Sultan of Oman , Qaboos bin Said, connected with bilateral brotherly relations. The message was conveyed to president al-Assad by Omani Minister For Foreign Affairs, Yousuf Bin Alawi. The latest developments on the Arab and regional arenas were reviewed , particularly the on going tragedies in the occupied Palestinian territories with the continuation of the siege on the Palestinian people in Gaza. The necessity for the achievement of Palestinian reconciliation , and formation of a national unity government that can achieve the aims of the Palestinian people , was stressed. Talks also dealt with the Arab-Arab relations and with prospects of developing them further for the achievement of joint Arab solidarity , and serving the Arab just causes , on top of which , the Palestinian cause. In the same framework, Vice President Farouk al-Shara and Foreign minister , Walid Moallem met the Omani minister. Grand Mofti of the Republic, Ahmad Badriddin Hasoun , also met Minister Alawi. In a statement to reporters , the Omani minister said that he was honored by meeting President al-Assad this morning and that he conveyed to him a cordial message from his brother Sultan Kabous in the framework of mutual consultations between Syria and Oman , connected with the Arab situation , and dealing with the repercussions of the Israeli aggression on Gaza, the political outcome of the Kuwait Summit , and with the future steps for finding the best ways to restore the Arab joint action particularly with the current changes in the world following the American elections. He added that he found President al-Assad dynamic as far as Syrian foreign policy is concerned , and agreement was made on boosting contacts , on doing everything whereby Arab solidarity can be achieved , and on help finding the mechanisms for the achievement of the strategic goal of how can the Palestinian reconciliation be supported with Arab unanimity on this principle., stressing the ncessity fo the Palestinian brothers to agree also on the achievement of this big strategic goal.
Bin Alawi indicated that agreement was made on the formation of a Syrian-Omani committee to be in charge of continuation of coordination and consultation for now and then. In reply to a question whether there is a Syrian-Omani vision with regard to the Palestinian reconciliation , the Omani minister said that there were a lot of visions and consultations with the brothers in order to have the Palestinian dialogue resumed in Egypt . He added that he touched President al-Assad's full support to the Egyptian effort for the achievement of the Palestinian national accord and reconciliation which represent the most important pillar on which the Palestinian independent state is established , with Jerusalem as its capital.

SOCIAL FRONT

5th Arab Youth Forum Kicks Off

During the opening of the 5th Arab Forum, which is organized by the Revolutionary Youth Union, Member of the al-Baath Party Regional Leadership Shahnaz Fakoush stressed that youths are one of the main pillars for building the civilization and future of nations which seek to achieve development, bolster their national culture, and resist hegemony. Fakoush underlined the reasons that forced Israel to end the holocaust it committed in Gaza Strip, mainly the legendary resistance of the defenseless people of Gaza who confronted the brutal Israeli aggression with only their faith in the

righteousness of their struggle. She underlined the role of the resistance culture in foiling enemy plots, calling on Arab youth to adopt this culture and spread it among generations as it guarantees the Arab nation's just hopes. Chairman of the Revolutionary Youth Union Dr. Adnan Arbash underlined the important role of youths in bolstering the values of the Arab society and preserving the Arab nation's cultural identity in the face of globalization and hegemony. Members of the participating delegations expressed pride in Syria's stances that support the Arab causes and aim at boosting their standing among peoples. They also praised the resilience of the people of Gaza in the face of the Israeli holocaust. Later, the activities of the three-day forum kicked off, with the participation of 250 Arab youths.

Bkheitan Receives Yoouth Delegation, Confirms Importance of Consolidating Ideology of Resistance

Assistant Regional Secretary-General of the Baath Arab Socialist Party Mohamed Said Bkheitan underlined Thursday the importance of the youth role in building the nation's future, consolidating the national and pan-Arab directions and in enhancing culture of the resistance. Receiving delegations participating in the 5th He reviewed the political circumstances and attitudes which accompanied the Zionist aggression on the Palestinian people in Gaza, noting to the victory of the Palestinian resistance and failure of the aggression to achieve objectives despite using the latest internationally prohibited weapons of killings and destruction against civilians, affirming the importance of exploiting this victory for restoring the legitimate rights of Palestinian people. In turn, heads of delegations, appreciated Syria's patriotic method and her support for the Arab causes, praising its role in strengthening Arab solidarity and backing institutions of the joint Arab action. Earlier, the 3-day Arab Youth Forum recommended fixing the culture of resistance as a culture of Arab generations in the face of culture of surrender and submission. The forum also recommended the solidarity regarding the Arab issues, emphasizing the need to liberate the occupied Arab territories in the Golan, Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq and the Comoros Islands and that the Palestinian cause is the Arab's central cause. The forum called for combating all forms of normalization with Israel and broadening the base of the economic, cultural and academic boycotting Israel. It recommended adoption of the resistance option and maintaining Arabic Language and strengthening its position and its role in preservation of the identity and cultural heritage in addition to using information technology and communications to spread national awareness, explain Arab causes and to expose the Israeli crimes in the region.

Syrian students appreciate Erdogan stances

Syrian students expressed appreciation and respect for the honorable stances of Turkish Premier Recep Tayyib Erdogan and his support to the Arab and Islamic just and human issues, particularly the Palestinian issue. "Your withdrawal from Davos Economic Forum after facing the head of the Zionist entity and refuting his crimes and brutal practices against the unarmed Palestinians is considered as a true expression of your preservation of the dignity and backing the rights," the students said in a letter sent to Erdogan through the Turkish Ambassador in

Damascus. The students also expressed appreciation of the Turkish friendly people and their embracement around the honorable stances of Erdogan.

EGYPT

POLITICAL FRONT

Hamas meets Egypt intelligence chief on Gaza truce

Hamas and Egyptian officials continued talks in Cairo night aimed at achieving a long-term truce in Gaza, as violence flared around the Palestinian enclave. Representatives of the Islamist movement that has controlled Gaza since seizing it 18 months ago met Egyptian intelligence chief Omar Suleiman, Cairo's pointman on Palestinian and Israeli affairs, hours after Gaza militants fired a rocket at an Israeli town. Israeli warplanes bombed smuggling tunnels on Gaza's border with Egypt in response and the Jewish state warned of the "severest riposte" to rocket fire. Hamas has said the group is ready to agree to a one-year truce with Israel, but has not ruled out an 18-month truce proposed by Egyptian mediators. The delegation met Suleiman in the morning and went into another round of talks in the evening. Salah al-Bardawil, a member of the delegation from Gaza, told a Palestinian news agency between sessions that the talks were "positive."

Hamas had agreed to form committees with other Palestinian groups to oversee reconstruction of Gaza but had questions on Israeli restrictions on goods it would allow through its border crossings with Gaza, Ma'an news agency quoted him as saying. Hamas has repeatedly demanded the opening of the crossings in exchange for a truce. Israel blockaded the territory after Hamas seized it.

ECONOMIC FRONT

Indian investor raises bid for Egyptian firm

An Indian investor has raised his bid for Egyptian medical equipment firm Alexandria Medical Services to LE 80 ($14.41) a share, outbidding the previous high bid by an Egyptian businessman, the stock exchange said. The new bid, from businessman Bavaguthu Raghuram Shetty, values the company at LE 112 million. Shetty, who runs a healthcare business in the United Arab Emirates, first offered LE 72 for 100 percent of the shares. The Egyptian businessman, Gamal Abdel Fattah Abdel Rahman Hamada, then made an offer of LE 73.50 per share. Short Hills Development, a company based in the British Virgin Islands, had earlier made a 100 percent takeover bid for the medical company at LE 65 a share.

Egypt, Swiss Free Trade Boosts Export Numbers

Trade Minister Rachid Mohamed Rachid and Swiss Vice President Doris Leuthard said Tuesday that keeping bilateral trade open was essential to surviving the worst economic crisis since World War II. Just back from last week's World Economic Forum at the Swiss ski resort of Davos, Rachid met with Leuthard during her visit to Cairo, which ends today. Leuthard, who is also head of the Swiss Federal Department of Economic Affairs. Leuthard headed Monday an economic mission to Egypt where she met with a number of officials including Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif as well as the Ministers of Finance, Trade, Investment and International Cooperation. Egypt's free trade agreement (FTA) with Switzerland came into effect 18 months ago. "It's important that the world not embark on protectionism amid the financial crisis. Therefore, an FTA plays a vital role not only in prosperous times but also in difficult times," Leuthard said.

Egypt and Switzerland currently enjoy an FTA with the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) that was signed in January 2007. Under the agreement, Egyptian products — mainly in industrial and agricultural sectors — have privileged access to EFTA markets, which include Switzerland, Norway, Lichtenstein and Iceland. Egyptian products entering these markets are exempt from customs- and quota-duties effective in 2007. Industrial products manufactured in EFTA countries gain customs- and quota-free access to the Egyptian market to the year 2020. Based on Egypt's trade ministry records, total trade between Egypt and EFTA states amounted to some $425 million in fiscal year 2006/7, with Egypt's imports reaching $361 million. The ministry's latest statistics show that bilateral trade between Egypt and Switzerland grew to $412.6 million in 2007 up from $361.3 in 2006. Swiss exports to Egypt reached $389.5 million, while Egypt's exports amounted to $23.1 million. In the first nine months of 2008, bilateral trade jumped to $549.8 million, out of which Swiss exports constituted $442.3 million and Egyptian exports $17.4 million. Egypt's main exports to Switzerland include fruits, vegetables, edible oil, nuts, cereals, as well as apparel and clothing accessories. Swiss exports are mainly pharmaceutical products, machinery and mechanical appliances, organic chemicals, watches and medical instruments. The most populous Arab country sells 60 percent of its exports to the United States and Europe, but that figure is down from 85 percent four years ago, and Egypt is continuing to diversify into other markets in Asia, the Gulf, Africa and even Latin America, where demand is holding up better than in developed countries. The deepening economic crisis, and the failure to complete the WTO's long-running Doha round on freeing up global commerce, have raised fears in Davos that countries will block imports from their trading partners so as to protect jobs at home.

GEO STRATEGIC FRONT

Gaza violence simmers as Egypt holds truce talks

Violence simmered around Gaza as Palestinian militants fired a rocket into Israel a day after a deadly air raid, while talks on a long-term truce in the Hamas-run enclave dragged on in Egypt. The rocket caused damage but no injuries in the town of Ashkelon, 13 kilometres (eight miles) from Gaza's border, the furthest a rocket has reached inside Israel since the end of an Israel-Hamas war on January 18, medics said. The strike came as Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt was set to visit the battered coastal strip, where on Monday the army carried out a deadly air raid after Israel -- which goes to the polls in a week -- warned of a harsh response to renewed rocket fire. Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, whose ruling centrist Kadima party is trailing in opinion polls to right-wing opposition Likud in the runup to February 10 elections, on Tuesday called for a tough response. Defence Minister Ehud Barak, whose centre-left Labour is shown in the polls to be slipping to fourth-largest party in parliament down from the second spot it currently holds, convened an emergency meeting of military and intelligence chiefs on Tuesday, army radio said. It was the latest incident to further shake the mutual January 18 ceasefires called by the Jewish state and Hamas that ended Israel's deadly 22-day war on the Islamist rulers of the impoverished coastal strip. While Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert vowed on Sunday to deal "a severe and disproportionate" response to new rocket fire, Barak was quoted as saying the army had no intention of embarking on a second war in. Israel's Operation Cast Lead, launched on December 27 in response to continuing rocket fire, killed more than 1,300 Palestinians and 13 Israelis. Since the offensive ended last month, more than 15 rockets have been fired from Gaza, wounding one civilian and two soldiers, Israel says. Barak said that although most of the rockets were not fired by Hamas, the Islamist movement which is pledged to Israel's destruction and which has controlled Gaza since June 2007, the group bore responsibility for the attacks.

Egypt to host Gaza reconstruction forum March 2

Egypt is to host an international conference on March 2 to raise funds to rebuild the Gaza Strip, which was devastated by a 22-day Israeli assault, the foreign ministry announced. Cairo has undertaken "intensive diplomatic contacts with regional and international parties" to convene the conference at the level of foreign ministers, ministry spokesman Hossam Zaki said. The conference will also tackle "the means to respond rapidly to the urgent humanitarian aid needed in Gaza," he added.

According to Zaki, Egypt is organising the conference with "full coordination with the Palestinian Authority" of president Mahmud Abbas, whose security forces have been driven out of Gaza by the Islamist Hamas movement. Zaki did not say however where the conference would take place and who had been invited to attend. But he said political issues linked to Gaza's reconstruction would be on the agenda of the talks, such as the reopening of crossing points leading to the war-battered coastal strip, as demanded by Hamas. The clashes effectively divided the Palestinian people, with Hamas ruling the Gaza Strip and the Western-backed Abbas's remit limited to the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Egypt prevents Hamas taking millions into Gaza: official

Egypt stopped a senior Hamas official from carrying nine million dollars and two million euros in cash through the Rafah bordering crossing into Gaza on Thursday, a security official told AFP. Border officials had held up a six-member delegation returning from truce talks in Cairo after insisting on searching their bags. The officials allowed five members to cross, but prevented Gaza-based Hamas spokesman Ayman Taha, who was carrying the cash, from entering Gaza with the money. After contacting the finance ministry, security officials accompanied Taha to a bank in nearby El-Arish, where he deposited the money in account before returning to Gaza, the official said. Israel's devastating 22-day offensive on Gaza ended with unilateral ceasefires on January 18.

The war killed at least 1,330 Palestinians and 13 Israelis and destroyed or damaged 14,000 homes, 68 government buildings and 31 structures used by non-government groups, the UN Development Programme has said. During the conflict, Egypt allowed aid, medical supplies and some doctors and journalists into Gaza. Palestinian prime minister Salam Fayyad urged Israel to allow cash into the besieged enclave to ease its liquidity crisis. Cairo had proposed Thursday as the starting date for a long-term truce, with Hamas saying it would send a delegation back to Cairo on Saturday to give its "final" response to Egypt's proposal.

Israel dropped Shalit truce demand: Hamas official

Israel has dropped its demand for Palestinian militants to release soldier Gilad Shalit before it will end its blockade of the Gaza Strip, a senior Hamas official told. Israel was no longer linking the release of Shalit, whom Gaza militants captured more than two years ago, to any move to end its blockade of Gaza, said the official, Ayman Taha. Israel has repeatedly said it will end the blockade, imposed after the Palestinian militant group Hamas seized control of Gaza in June 2007, when Hamas releases Shalit. Taha, who was in Cairo for truce talks with Egyptian mediators, said Israel had dropped a number of demands for a truce since both Hamas and Israel declared ceasefires on January 18 to end a 22-day war in Gaza. Taha also said Israel was no longer demanding that Hamas sign a written agreement to end smuggling into Gaza. But another delegation member, Salah al-Bardawil, said Hamas had reservations about Israeli restrictions on goods it would allow through its crossings with the impoverished Palestinian enclave.

Bardawil told Egyptian television that Israel was proposing to allow "between 70 and 80" percent of goods into Gaza, barring those it said could be used to make weapons.

Egypt prevents Hamas taking millions into Gaza

Egyptian authorities prevented a senior Hamas official carrying nine million dollars and two million euros in cash entering Gaza via Rafah, a security official told AFP. Border official had held up a six-member delegation on its way back from truce talks in Cairo after insisting that they search their bags. The officials allowed five members to cross, but prevented Gaza-based Hamas spokesman Ayman Taha, who was carrying nine million dollars and two million euros, from crossing into Gaza with the money. Hamas officials crossed several times into Gaza with large amounts of money after winning parliamentary elections in 2006, but this was the first attempt made since Hamas seized Gaza from rivals Fatah in June 2007, the official said. In December 2006, Hamas prime minister Ismail Haniya was forced to leave 35 million dollars at the Egyptian side of Rafah. The money was then transferred to a Palestinian Authority account. Egypt closed the Rafah crossing to all but exceptional cases after opening it to aid and wounded Palestinians during Israel's war on Hamas. Egypt allowed aid and medical supplies as well as some doctors and journalists into the Gaza Strip during Israel's devastating 22-day offensive on the territory which ended with unilateral ceasefires on January 18. Egypt has refused to permanently open the crossing in the absence of EU monitors and representatives of Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas after Hamas ousted his forces from the territory when it took over Gaza.

SOCIAL FRONT

UNRWA accuses Hamas of stealing Gaza aid packages

The UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) said Hamas has seized hundreds of food parcels and thousands of blankets destined for Gaza civilians in the wake of Israel's war. "UNRWA condemns in the strongest terms the confiscation of its aid supplies and has demanded that it is returned immediately." The Hamas government's social affairs minister Ahmed al-Kurd implicitely confirmed the aid was seized, arguing that it should be distributed to a wider section of the Gaza population and not only those who hold refugee status and benefit from UNRWA assistance. The Hamas government "is the main party responsible for the distribution and supervision of this aid in an equitable manner. We are responsible for the 1.5 million Palestinians in the Gaza Strip," he said. "We reject any discriminatory distinction." Israeli Welfare Minister Isaac Hertzog said the incident "is further proof that Hamas is continuing to make life miserable for the population of Gaza and will use any means to intensify its suffering." "Israel will continue to insist on its demand that humanitarian assistance transferred to the Gaza Strip is directed for the welfare of the civilian population only, without allowing Hamas to benefit from it," he said. Virtually all aid delivered to Gaza comes from UN and other humanitarian agencies.

The deliveries are an exception to the crippling blockade of Gaza, but Israel has regularly responded to rocket attacks by preventing aid convoys from entering the besieged territory. UNRWA plays a key role in distributing aid in the impoverished Hamas-ruled Palestinian enclave, and says it is handing out food assistance 900,000 people, out of a 1.5-million population.

Tourism contracts hit by crisis

Abdul Rahman Anwar, chairman of the Hotels Chamber, said that Egyptian tourism companies did not sign any contracts during the Madrid's tourism fair for the next summer season due to global financial crisis.

LEBANON

POLITICAL FRONT

Gemayel welcomes alliance with Murr in June elections

Former Lebanese president and Phalange (Kataeb) Party leader Amin Gemayel welcomed on Thursday the alliance with MP Michel Murr in the forthcoming elections and said discussing the issue of telephone wiretapping should "start with tackling Hezbollah's bugging and monitoring network." "We shouldn't forget that Hezbollah has the largest monitoring and bugging network in Lebanon. If we are going to handle the wiretapping issue, we should start with this one (Hezbollah 's)," Gemayel said in a radio interview. He said MP Murr "recognized, at last, that the alliance with (FPM leader) Michel Aoun does not serve the interests of neither the citizens of Metn nor the Lebanese people as a whole," he noted. Michel Murr was allied with general Aoun during the 2005 elections , but yesterday he announced that he will be running as an independent and criticized Aoun and his Free Patriotic Movement: "We were the victims of our alliance with Aoun." Murr said. Other prominent Christian leaders criticized Aoun too. National Bloc leader Carlos Edde said Tuesday that the "FPM leader is spreading hatred in a nation that had experienced 34 years of turbulence and was in need of unifying language, not slander."

Calls for Lebanon's middle bloc gain steam

The Phalange Party launched its electoral campaign for Lebanon's upcoming parliamentary polls as the issue of forming a centrist bloc drew more controversy over the weekend. Phalange central committee coordinator Sami Gemayel addressed his comrades on behalf of his father, former President Amin Gemayel, who traveled to Rome on Sunday for talks with Italian officials. Almost 1,800 party members gathered at Habtoor Hotel is the eastern Beirut suburb of Sin al-Fil. Gemayel said his party was not running for the purpose of gaining seats in Parliament but rather for a national cause. He added that the Phalange Party was strictly against Hizbullah's "illegitimate possession of arms."

MP Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) said in a statement Sunday that it was considering all possible ways to make sure the June 7 polls would end up in favor of March 14 as

well as centrist candidates. Jumblatt was quoted earlier as telling the pan-Arab daily Asharq al-Awsat that there would be no solution to Lebanon's political crisis in the absence of a centrist bloc that is allied to the president. The PSP leader said his party's candidates in the qada of Baabda would run alongside two independent candidates, Edmond Gharios and Salah Hnein. Gharios is the brother-in-law of MP Michel Murr, who is believed to be the key politician behind the idea of forming a centrist bloc to break the division between the March 14 and the March 8 alliances. Key March 8 figures have recently asked President Michel Sleiman to clarify his stance on the formation of a centrist bloc. Sleiman has repeatedly denied he was seeking such bloc.

Hariri: We Would Not Allow Attempts to Suffocate Beirut

Mustaqbal Movement leader Saad Hariri advised student representatives to stay away from fanatic political and religious ideologies and urged Beirut citizens to turn out heavily at a rally marking the fourth anniversary of his father's assassination to prevent attempts to suffocate Beirut. "You stood fast on May 7 and throughout the past years" since the 2005 assassination of ex-Premier Rafik Hariri, he told representatives of Beirut families. Hariri was referring to the attack by Hizbullah on May 7, 2008, against Beirut's western sector.

Hariri says parliamentary elections to be held on time

Lebanese Sunni majority leader Saad Hariri said Monday that the parliamentary elections in June is to be held on schedule, local daily Al-Mustaqbal reported. The ruling coalition will go to the elections as a "unified list," Hariri said. The ruling March 14 coalition and the March 8 opposition are heating up their competition of the elections which decide who will rule the country for the next four years. There are concerns that the group who feels would lose in the upcoming elections would try to hinder the elections. Hariri accused the opposition of attacking independent candidates "before they know who they are," while the opposition slashed the ruling coalition of tricking the Lebanese people by calling their candidates "independent." Meanwhile, Hariri also said that the international tribunal about the assassination of his father Rafik Hariri is to begin on March 1. Former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was killed in Beirut by a car bomb on Feb. 14, 2005, which the Lebanese ruling coalition accused Syria behind the incident, but the latter denied any involvement.

Edde: Aoun is spreading hatred in lebanon

National Bloc leader Carlos Edde said that FPM leader MP Michel Aoun’s threats “to cut tongues and break hands is in harmony with Hezbollah’s language and contradicts his claims that he is the representative of the Christians in the East.” EddÃ© told a Lebanese news agency on Tuesday that “Aoun has revealed his true nature and his words are an expression of what

he[truly] feels." EddÃ© added that Aoun was spreading hatred in a nation that had experienced 34 years of turbulence and was in need of unifying language, not slander. There was a great discrepancy between what Aoun said and the truth, EddÃ© said, before calling Aoun "a man full of hatred and envy." Press Syndicate Rejects Exploitation of Freedom to Commit Slander The Press Syndicate rejected Thursday the exploitation of the atmosphere of freedom by some politicians and launch attacks against the Lebanese press. The Syndicate described the attacks as going beyond ethical norms. "The Executive Bureau is keen on maintaining the atmosphere of freedom that guarantees the right of expression through different media outlets," said a statement after a meeting by its Executive Bureau headed by Mohammed Baalbaki. It called on all politicians from any political background to commit and adhere to ethical norms in addressing each other and the press.

Baroud Launches Election Newsletter

Interior Minister Ziad Baroud on Wednesday announced the launch of a new bimonthly newsletter exclusively devoted to parliamentary elections.Baroud said the free-of-charge newsletter would be published via the Internet. He said the bulletin would also be printed for distribution among Cabinet ministers as well as lawmakers and heads of municipalities and mayors.

SOCIAL FRONT

Edde to Aoun: Where Are Your Christian Values?

National Bloc Party leader Carlos Edde accused Free Patriotic Movement leader Gen. Michel Aoun of "pumping hatred into the Lebanese people." "What is more serious is that Aoun claims to represent Christians and vows to cut tongues and hands of brothers in humanity, only because they disagree with him," Edde said in a statement. "Where are the Christian values in Aoun's address, although he claims to represent Christians of the Orient?" Edde asked.

Skaf family says its son is still an Israeli prisoner

The families of Yehya Skaf and Dalal al-Mughrabi held a joint press conference at Akkar, calling for finding the truth behind their whereabouts. Skaf's brother called on Hezbollah's Secretary-

General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah to continue his struggle to determine the whereabouts of his brother. Rashida al-Mughrabi, discussed the issue of her sister, saying: "Regarding Dalal's remains, we won't accept anything less than her actual remains, and not what the unknown remains that the enemy sends." "Our sister Dalal has the human right for a decent and dignified burial following three decades of captivity and martyrdom," she said. Dalal al-Mughrabi and Yehya Skaf participated with a group of Palestinians in an attack inside Israel on March 11, 1978. Israel claimed that both Dalal and Yehya were killed at the time. Hezbollah chief Nasrallah suggested Skaf to be part of a prisoner exchange during the July 2006 war with Israel. Skaf was not included in a July 2008 prisoner exchange. Although Israel claims that his remains and that of Mughrabi were. Last Thursday, Nasrallah announced that DNA tests on exhumed bodies given to Lebanon by Israel were inconclusive in identifying both Skaf and al-Mughrabi. He held Israel responsible for their whereabouts.

U.N. criticizes Israel and Hamas

John Ging, the director of operations for the United Nations refugee agency in Gaza, said Thursday that Israel's blockade was creating growing misery there by choking off basic humanitarian supplies like food, medicine, clothes and blankets as well as school supplies.

He also criticized the leadership of Hamas for letting its police force run wild, attacking a distribution center for the needy to cart off supplies. "We are neither getting in the volume nor the range of supplies that we need here," Mr. Ging told reporters at the United Nations, speaking via video link-up from Gaza. "This is creating a lot of misery among the people." In one example, Mr. Ging said that the teachers in the schools run by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency had worked throughout the three-week Israeli bombardment that ended Jan. 18 to create a new human rights curriculum. But because Israel was blocking paper supplies, the textbooks and workbooks could not be printed, so some 60 percent of the children in United Nations schools lack books. The human rights curriculum was designed to combat extremism, he said, a growing problem in the wake of the Israeli bombardment. Ordinary Gazans are particularly frustrated, he said, because they have seen news reports about generous donations from around the world stuck just outside the enclave. It is premature to talk about Gaza's reconstruction until the issue of access for basic humanitarian supplies is fixed, Mr. Ging said.

SECURITY FRONT

Hizbullah Threatens Arabs Who Accept Peace with Israel

Hizbullah made an indirect threat targeting Arabs who accept peace with Israel

"There must be a review and reconsideration of stands against those who pursue with placing bets on a settlement that would legalize the Zionist occupation of Palestine," said Mohammed Raad, leader of Hizbullah's parliamentary bloc. Raad's remarks reflect Hizbullah's rejection of the Arab peace initiative that the party's second in command, Sheik Naim Qassem, had said it was "buried" after the war in Gaza. Raad also vowed that "any imbecility that the Israeli enemy may commit in Lebanon would reflect badly on them."

5 rockets found in south Lebanon near Israeli border

A senior official from the U.N. peacekeeping force in south Lebanon says five rockets have been found near the Israeli border. Milos Strugar says the rockets were discovered along with a launching pad by a patrol of peacekeepers Wednesday in Wadi Hamoul 5 kilometers east of the town of Naqoura where the U.N. force is headquartered. They were not set to be fired. Strugar said Lebanese army units were called in and an investigation was under way. The militant group Hezbollah, which has a strong presence in south Lebanon, has a large rocket arsenal, but is not believed to have used them against Israel since their 2006 war. Rockets from Lebanon were fired into Israel on two occasions during Israel's Gaza offensive. Palestinian militant groups are suspected of firing them.

Fatah Islam Detainee Admits to Attack on UNIFIL

Palestinian detainee Salim Kayed admitted to planting a roadside bomb that targeted a U.N. patrol belonging to the Tanzanian contingent on Qassmiyeh Bridge near the southern port city of Tyre in the summer of 2007. Kayed said he was working under instructions from Abu Mohammed Awad, a Palestinian wanted in the Fatah al-Islam criminal dossier. Awad is said to be the new leader of Fatah al-Islam in Ain el-Hilweh after its leader Shaker Abssi went missing following the end of the fighting with the Lebanese army at the northern refugee camp of Nahr el-Bared.

Israeli navy attacks Gaza-bound Lebanese aid ship

The Israeli navy opened fire in the direction of a Lebanese vessel heading towards the Gaza Strip on Thursday and assaulted some of the people on board the ship carrying humanitarian aid, Al Jazeera television reported. The Israeli military did not have an immediate comment on the incident. Jazeera said attempts to re-establish contact with Khoder had failed. It did not say how many people were on board the boat. The boat was carrying humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip where thousands of people were left homeless after Israel's 22-day offensive, which ended on Jan. 18, during which about 1,300 Palestinians were killed and hundreds of houses destroyed. The aid on board the

ship came from mainly Lebanese and Arab charities. The shipment was organized by the Palestinian National Committee Against the Siege in cooperation with the U.S.-based Free Gaza Movement. In December, the Israeli navy clashed with a small boat, Dignity, carrying international activists with aid for Gaza and forced it to divert to Lebanon's waters. Israel declared the Gaza coastal territory a closed military zone after it started the offensive on Dec. 27 to stop Palestinian militant group Hamas firing rockets at Israeli towns and settlements.

Israel Vows Painful Response to Any Hizbullah Attack

Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak responded to threats by Lebanon's Hizbullah by saying any attack would prompt a painful and beyond imagination response from Israel. "I want to say here, on the border, that I don't recommend that Hizbullah test us because the consequences would be more painful than one can imagine," Barak said during a visit to the Israeli-Lebanese frontier area. Hizbullah chief Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah vowed last week to avenge the killing of top commander Imad Mughniyeh who died in a February 2008 car bombing in Damascus which the Shiite group blamed on Israel. "I want to tell the Lebanese government we would hold it responsible," Barak said, according to a statement by the defense ministry. Barak also expressed concern that Syria could transfer weapons to Hizbullah, something he said would "change the strategic balance and force Israel to act."

Hamas official allowed into Gaza without the cash

A senior Hamas member trying to return to Gaza Thursday after talks with Egyptian mediators was turned back at the Rafah crossing by border guards who found cash in his bags totaling nearly 12 million dollars. But Senior Hamas member Ayman Taha was allowed back into the strip after Egyptian authorities insisted he put the money in a bank in the north Sinai town of Arish, al-Arabiya news channel reported.

Border guards found the cash - 9 million dollars and 2 million Euros (2.6 million dollars) - as they searched the six-member Hamas delegation, who were in Cairo for talks with Egyptian mediators about the proposed long-term truce with Israel. The rest of the members were allowed to pass. Egyptian authorities reassured Taha (pictured) that he can collect the money at another time. He declined to tell al-Arabiya about the source of the money, saying: "This is not the question we should ask. We should rather ask how much longer we will be carrying money in bags?" "Isn't it time to open the borders and lift the siege?" Taha told the Dubai-based news channel in a phone interview shortly after he passed the border into Gaza.The Palestinian territory has a shortage of cash caused by the Israeli blockade and other sanctions. Israel complains that Hamas smuggles money and weapons through Egypt into the Gaza Strip."I was just carrying the money for the Palestinian people who suffered from the war and the siege," Taha said.Earlier Thursday, Israel gave the go-ahead for a cash delivery into the Gaza Strip for

the first time since its recent military offensive against Gaza, Israeli media reports said. The reports said 175 million shekels (42 million dollars) would be transferred from the West Bank to banks in the Gaza Strip in order to pay around 70,000 employees of the Palestinian Authority of President Mahmoud Abbas.

GEO STRATEGIC FRONT

Lebanese "Brotherhood Ship" Ordeal Ends after Israel Releases Passengers

The daylong ordeal of a pirated Lebanese ship trying to deliver humanitarian aid to Gaza ended early Friday after Israel released the crew and passengers and handed them over to UNIFIL. All 18 passengers and crew members, including journalists, were freed at 2:00 am after being held for several hours following the seizure of the ship by the Israeli navy.

Passengers told stories about how they were beaten and handcuffed.

Israeli authorities said the Togolese-flagged "Tali" was intercepted as it tried to enter Gaza's territorial waters. The Tali had earlier stopped over at the nearby Mediterranean island of Cyprus where authorities inspected the cargo before continuing its voyage towards Gaza. Nine Lebanese, including journalists, and a Palestinian resident returned to Lebanon after they were handed over to the U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon at the Lebanese-Israeli border crossing of Naqoura. Former Greek Catholic archbishop of Jerusalem Hillarion Capucci, 86, was taken to the Golan Heights where he crossed into Syria. Three others were to be flown out to London early Friday, Israeli officials have said. It was not immediately clear where the four other people detained were headed. She said the Israeli navy intercepted and detained the ship and its passengers in Egyptian territorial waters. Khodr said Ugarith Danadash, a female reporter working for Lebanon's New TV, and Hani Suleiman, one of the organizers, were also beaten up.

Jumblat Hammers FPM, Hamas, Syria, Iran

Progressive Socialist Party leader Walid Jumblat termed Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement "hostile (faction) affiliated with the Syrian regime." He said the ministry "withheld" data needed by the U.N. commission probing the 2005 assassination of ex-Premier Rafik Hariri and related crimes. He also accused "officers of the previous era" of "infiltrating" into the ministry of telecommunications after Bassil assumed the portfolio.

Syrian President Bashar Assad, Jumblat added, "would not allow the international tribunal to try even a sergeant in his regime." Jumblat also criticized Hamas Movement and spoke of information that it was arming up for a possible coup against the Palestine Liberation Organization in refugee camps across Lebanon. The Druze leader said Iran wants to spread its influence across the Arab World using "the Syrian regime, Hamas and Hizbullah." Jumblat declared support for "independent candidates" in constituencies where March 14 partisans cannot win the elections. He accused leaders of March 8 factions of persisting with their visits to Damascus "to receive instructions."

Israel Says Hezbollah Planning Murder Or Abduction Bid

Israel's counter-terrorism bureau warned that Hezbollah is planning to abduct or kill Israeli officials ahead of the anniversary of the assassination of the Lebanese militia's senior leader. The bureau reiterated its travel warnings for Israelis, calling on tourists and businessmen to take special precaution in hotels, restaurants and recreational spots abroad. The anti-terror bureau has issued a number of warnings that Hezbollah was seeking to target or abduct Israelis abroad following the assassination of Hezbollah commander Imad Mughniyeh in Damascus in February 2008. Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah on Thursday vowed to avenge Mughniyeh's killing, which he blamed on Israel, although the Jewish state has denied any involvement in the incident. In 2000, Hezbollah snatched Israeli businessman Elhanan Tannenbaum after luring him to the United Arab Emirates. He was released in January 2004 as part of a prisoner exchange deal with the militia.

Lebanon: New Palestinian group 'planning attack' on Egyptian embassy

A new Palestinian militant group based in the volatile Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp could be planning to attack the Egyptian Embassy in Lebanon because Cairo refused to open its border with Gaza during Israel's recent military offensive against the enclave. Media reports, confirmed by a Lebanese security official, say the new group was set up after Israel launched its military onslaught against Gaza in December. Reports say it has been conducting training exercises in preparation for an attack. Egypt could be targeted because of its refusal to open the Rafah crossing point on its border with Gaza during the fighting, effectively trapping Gazan civilians in the midst of an Israeli military operation hallmarked by large numbers of civilian casualties. At least 1,400 people were killed during three weeks of fighting. The group, called the Jihad Movement for the Victory of Gaza, is said to include militants wanted for previous terrorist offenses who were recruited from groups like Fatah al-Islam, Jund al-Sham and Osbat al-Ansar. Some reports have linked Abdel-Rahman Awad, a fugitive militant believed to have assumed leadership of the Fatah al-Islam group, to the new organization. Awad is known as the "Prince of Al-Qaeda" in Lebanon and is thought to be hiding inside Ain al-Hilweh. In December security services warned he was planning new attacks in Lebanon. He added

that it is "possible" that an attack on the embassy will be attempted. Reports said that the group, set up by a Palestinian called Jamal Hamad with the help of a wanted Lebanese militant called Ghandi Sahmarani, has been trained by "foreign experts" in camps in the Bekaa Valley. He pointed out that even if a small group did try to launch an attack it would likely be thwarted by the authorities before it could be carried out. "No one would allow it," he said. The group is the second new militant organization established in Lebanon since Israel launched its offensive against Gaza. Last month a group calling itself the Arab Islamic Resistance, claiming to have three thousand trained members armed with advanced weaponry, said it would "not stand idly by" as Gaza was attacked.

Hamas thanks Iran for its support in Gaza war

Hamas' top political leader thanked Iran Monday for its support during Israel's Gaza offensive, calling his movement's most powerful ally a "partner in victory." Khaled Mashaal received a hero's welcome from hundreds of Iranians at Tehran University, where a crowd chanted: "Hail to the soldier of holy war." On Sunday, he met the country's two top leaders, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Mashaal's visit to Tehran underlined his group's close ties with Iran. But the country's substantial financial backing for the Palestinian militant group could be strained in the coming months, as the Islamic Republic struggles with growing financial troubles exacerbated by the sharp drop in oil prices. Mashaal's visit was his first since Israel launched its three-week assault in late December, aimed at stopping years of Hamas rocket fire into southern Israel. The fighting killed nearly 1,300 Palestinians, Gaza officials say, along with 13 Israelis. A cease-fire went into effect two weeks ago but has since been tested by sporadic Palestinian shelling and retaliatory Israeli airstrikes. Hamas has claimed victory simply by surviving.Israel and the United States accuse Iran of supplying Hamas with weapons, including rockets. Tehran denies it, but says it does support Hamas financially — believed to be to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars. Mashaal, who heads the Hamas leadership-in-exile in Syria, said Iran played a "big role" in helping Hamas with money and moral support during Israel's assault.

ECONOMIC FRONT

Riad Salameh Named Best Middle East Central Bank Governor

Lebanon's Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh has been named the best Middle East Central Bank Governor by the internationally renowned Bankers magazine. Salameh is to receive his award at his office in Beirut. A delegation arrived in Lebanon to deliver Salameh his award. He was chosen for his experience and efficient capabilities in influencing the financial situation in Lebanon, and in being successful in helping the Mediterranean country avoid international and regional financial crises.

BUSINESS & POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD
GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL (GCC)
NEWS MONITORING REPORT
31ST JAN. 2009 TO 6TH FEB. 2009
Presentation: February 11, 2009
MADIHA KAUKAB

OUT LINE

GCC

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- **GCC health ministers' meeting begins today**
- **Concerns about job security of GCC nationals**
- **Women's higher education in the GCC improves 90% in 3 years**
- **GCC jobs should go to nationals: Turki**
- **GCC labour official begins visit**
- **GCC health ministers meet in Sanaa**
- **GCC regional labour inspection seminar concludes**

SAUDI ARAB

IR Desk

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- Indonesia to resume sending workers to Saudi Arabia
- King Abdul Aziz era US pilot honored
- Saud, Mitchell discuss Mideast peace process
- Abdullah, Mitchell discuss peace moves
- Gul sees vital Saudi-Turkish role for peace
- KSA, Turkey sign 2 pacts
- Hu to seek more oil supply

Social Desk

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- Poetry contests in Saudi Arabia anger Grand Mufti
- Royal family members hail King Abdullah's initiative for poor
- Saudi Centre to launch dialogue channel
- Ministry of Interior rejects easing Saudi foreign marriages
- Historic sites help link generations
- Projects ‘delayed, not deferred’

Economic Desk

- Saudi to boost bank deposits if needed

Gaza Desk

- Unite to reinforce Arabs, King urges Palestinians
- Gul lauds King’s efforts to unite Palestinians

BAHRAIN

IR Desk

- Arroyo talks will boost trade links
- Filipinos hailed
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Social Desk

- Bahrain prosecution lashes out at reports on 'prisoners of conscience'
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- 'Green' focus on beaches at festival
- New budget fears as talks collapse
- Minister opens the first 'green' expo

Economic Desk

- MPs' spending plan 'threat to economy'

Gaza Desk

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- Travel warning to Bahrainis
- Red tape delays Gaza mission
- Setback to Gaza mercy mission
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UAE

IR Desk

- UAE signs air services pact with Philippines
- Iran's war of words against UAE 'unjustified'
- Australians celebrate their growing presence in the UAE
- Hamdan to attend African Union meet
- Sharjah Ruler receives Emir's letter
- Pakistan minister hails decision by UAE to donate power plant
- Obama nod likely for UAE nuke deal
- UAE Vice President holds talks with President of Ireland
- UAE and Bahrain renew marine resources pact
- UAE 'can help make a difference'

Social Desk

- UAE considering establishment of crisis committee
- Mohammmad offers condolences
- Hamdan highlights UAE role in helping the poor
- Ministry survey to bring in more transparency

Economic Desk

- UAE should use wealth fund to revive economy: Advisory chief
- UAE proposes fresh initiatives to tackle crisis
- Call to inject more liquidity
- Lubna stresses strength of UAE economy
- Gulf shares fall as oil prices ease, economies weaken

Gaza Desk

- Aid continues to pour in for hapless Gaza victims

OMAN

IR Desk

- Al Hinai's message for Libyan official
- Minister receives German guests
- Al Sulaimi in talks with Moroccan minister
- Oman to attend Saudi forum on social responsibility
- Al Rowas receives Italian guests
- Oman crude rises after Saudi Arabia hikes prices
- Ministers, RAO commander receive S African officer
- Oman, Morocco seek ways to enhance relations
- Oman-German investment forum held

Social Desk

- Statistics Consultative Committee meets
- ESO hosted a talk on global warming
- Financial Affairs and Energy Resources Council meets
- Ministers of health session ends in Sanaa
- Majlis organises workshop on performance development

Gaza Desk

- Gaza fundraising drive picks up momentum
- Gaza donation campaign

QATAR

IR Desk

- Emir approves MoU with Saudi
- Minister meets US officials
- MoU with Japanese power firm renewed
- Brisbane team explores trade ties
- UK transport centre to set up lab at QSTP
- H E the Prime Minister meets Turkish Premier
- Benin president arrives in Doha
- Minister meets Japanese official
- Italy explores tourism ties with Qatar
- Italy to take part in Doha Cultural Fest
- The eagle has landed
- Qatari-Saudi border panel reaches two agreements
- Qatar welcomes president election in Somalia
- QAPCO contract to ship ethylene awarded to Norwegian company
- QAPCO to sell $35m worth surplus ethylene to Marubeni

Social Desk

- Most cancers are curable, conference told
- No meningitis cases in Qatar, says ministry
- National research survey released
- Deputy Prime Minister meets Maersk CEO

- Al Harm is ‘flower of the year’

Economic Desk

- QIB posts QR1.64bn profit
- Waiting it out
- Gulf states have strong balance sheets: AXA Group chief economist
- Qatar sees 10pc growth this year

Gaza Desk

- Qatar was right in calling summit: Mousa
- Israeli threats to Al Jazeera unacceptable: Media Centre
- Fund-raising concert for Gaza children
- RasGas donates QR1.25m to Gaza fund
- IBQ sponsors charity event in Al Khor
- Nation News in Brief: NHRC to hold conference on Palestine
- Qatar International School raises cash for Gaza aid appeal
- Call for partnership in rebuilding war-torn Gaza
- Al Jazeera English to air appeal for Gaza relief

KUWAIT

IR Desk

- Kuwait follows US policy on detainees

Social Desk

- Kuwait to vote on law to punish abuse of foreign workers
- Kuwait fund reduces global exposure
- Kuwaiti minister: Stimulus plan will restore confidence in finance sector
- Islamist MPs plan to question PM

Economic Desk

- Kuwait approves rescue plan amid political dispute
- Cabinet studies rescue plans
- Kuwait grapples with impact of global economic crisis

Seminar on Gulf water

A seminar on water resources in countries belonging to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) took place yesterday with Gulf and Japanese scholars attending. During the three-day meeting, which was attended by Japanese Ambassador to Kuwait Masatoshi Muto, the participants discussed problems associated with water resources in the Gulf.

In a keynote speech, Dr Naji Al-Meteri, Director General of the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research (KISR), said the seminar was a good opportunity for scholars, specialists and environmentalists from Gulf nations and Japan to talk about successful experiments relevant to the issue and to share views on state-of-the-art technology.

GCC health ministers' meeting begins today

Gulf countries to take part in the two-day 66th GCC Health Ministers Council conference which will begin in Yemen today. The conference will discuss several technical issues including fighting the cordial and hematal diseases, primary health care and central registration of medicine management.

The GCC health ministers will review some administrative topics, discuss a report on the activities of the GCC health ministers council executive office and its accomplishments, and follow up the decisions and recommendations issued by the council.

Concerns about job security of GCC nationals

The need of the hour is to strike a balance between the requirements of the job market while attempting to correct the demographic imbalance, a senior official has said.

Addressing concerns about ensuring job security of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nationals, amidst disturbing demographics which indicate the dominance of expatriates in the work force of these countries, Dr Abdul Wahid Khalid Al Humayd, Deputy Minister of Labour of Saudi Arabia, said that the influx of expatriates was demanded by the growing economies of the Gulf.

Women's higher education in the GCC improves 90% in 3 years

The role of women in the labour market and their improved educational background across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region were the major highlights during yesterday's meetings at the Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research (ECSSR) conference.

Within the last three years, women continuing with their higher education in the GCC have improved by over 90 per cent, allowing them to take up high positions in society, especially in Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, said Dr Fatima Al Shamsi, secretary general in the UAE University, during her speech titled Women and the Labour Market: Opportunities and Obstacles.

GCC jobs should go to nationals: Turki

Gulf Arab states, where foreigners make up half the workforce, should give employment preference to their citizens over expatriate labor, Prince Turki Al-Faisal said at a conference on human resources in Abu Dhabi.

“We should review our economic policies in a serious manner to build national economies that benefit their people and not the millions of foreign workers,” said the prince, who is chairman of the King Faisal Centerfor Research and Islamic Studies.

GCC labour official begins visit

Salim bin Ali al Mohari, Director-General of the Executive Office of the GCC Labour and Social Affairs Ministers' Council, arrived here yesterday to take part in the opening of a regional workshop on supporting labour departments policies on labour inspection in member states. Al Moharbi was welcomed upon his arrival by Sayyid Hamad bin Hilal al Busaidy, Manpower Ministry Under-Secretary for Labour Affairs, other officials.

GCC health ministers meet in Sanaa

Dr Ali bin Mohammed bin Moosa, Minister of Health, is heading Oman's delegation at a two-day conference of the GCC Health Ministers' Council which opens in Sanaa today. "The conference will discuss issues related to Nursing Specialty Council, primary health care, family medicine, central drug registration, follow up of the joint declaration of the GCC health ministers

on diabetes and follow up of the progress made in the national plans to implement the anti-diabetes plan", the minister said before his departure.

GCC regional labour inspection seminar concludes

A GCC regional labour inspection seminar concluded here yesterday. It was organised jointly by the executive office of the GCC Labour and Social Affairs Ministers, the Ministry of Manpower and the International Labour Organisation. The discussions centred around support for policies of labour inspection departments in the GCC.

SAUDI ARAB

IR Desk

Saudi Arabia publishes global 'most wanted' list

Saudi Arabia has published a list of 85 suspected militants wanted around the world who it said had been drawn to "deviant" ideologies—a reference to the Al Qaeda terror network. The list, published by the official news agency SPA , includes 83 Saudis and two Yemenis and calls for the suspects to turn themselves in to the authorities.

Indonesia to resume sending workers to Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's National Recruitment Committee and concerned Indonesian agencies have agreed to resume recruitment of housemaids and workers from the largest Muslim country to Saudi Arabia.

The bilateral agreement was reached on Friday at the end of negotiations that lasted 14 days in Jakarta between the two sides.

Indonesia will send workers to the Kingdom after providing the much sought after employment training and an intensive awareness program.

King Abdul Aziz era US pilot honored

Joseph W. Grant, a US World War II pilot, has been honored with the King Abdul Aziz Medal – First Class. The award was presented to Grant by Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to the United States, Adel Bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir, on behalf of King Abdullah, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, at a ceremony in the US capital this week.

The King Abdul Aziz Medal is awarded in recognition of significant contributions made by an individual to the Kingdom.

Saud, Mitchell discuss Mideast peace process

Prince Saud Al-Faisal, Foreign Minister, and George Mitchell, US Mideast envoy, on Saturday discussed "the importance of moving the peace process forward" to achieve an independent, contiguous and viable Palestinian state.

Mitchell flew in to the Saudi capital late Saturday on the final leg of a regional tour aimed at reviving peace efforts. Mitchell was also expected to meet King Abdullah, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, and a key force behind the Arab peace initiative to resolve the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

Abdullah, Mitchell discuss peace moves

King Abdullah, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, received George Mitchell, US envoy to the Middle East, here Sunday for a discussion on the Palestinian cause, the peace process in the region and the importance of stepping up international efforts to reach a just and comprehensive solution enabling the Palestinians to establish an independent and viable state.

The audience was attended by Prince Saud Al-Faisal, the Foreign Minister, and other officials.

Gul sees vital Saudi-Turkish role for peace

Turkish President Abdullah Gul strongly supports the decision of King Abdullah, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, to table the Arab peace initiative as a means of extricating the Middle East region from its predicament.

It was "a wise decision" since the initiative has laid a strong foundation for a comprehensive solution to the conflict in the region on the basis of justice and right, Gul told the editors-in-chief of the Saudi newspapers Okaz, Al-Hayat and Al-Madina during an interview in Ankara recently.

KSA, Turkey sign 2 pacts

Saudi Arabia and Turkey on Tuesday signed two agreements here Tuesday on marine transportation and sports cooperation. The agreements were signed on the occasion of the visit of Turkish President Abdullah Gul, who arrived in Riyadh earlier in the day. The talks between King Abdullah, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques and President Gul were focused on efforts to defuse Middle East tension in the wake of Israel's recent barbarity in the Gaza Strip.

Hu to seek more oil supply

Chinese President Hu Jintao will arrive here on Feb. 10 on a two-day official visit to the Kingdom, Yong Hong Lin, Chinese Ambassador told a press conference at his residence, Wednesday. President Hu will hold talks with King Abdullah, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, on bilateral relations between the two countries focusing on political and economic issues including trade, energy cooperation, education, cultural relations and Haj, Lin said.

Social Desk

Saudi state spending 'will help cope with low oil prices'

Saudi Arabian central bank Governor Hamad Saud Al Sayari said government spending will help the country overcome a slump in revenue caused by falling oil prices.

"Growth will continue in the non-oil sector this year thanks to government spending and investments in infrastructure," Al Sayari said in an interview in Davos.

Poetry contests in Saudi Arabia anger Grand Mufti

Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdul Aziz Alu Al Sheikh has come out heavily against the practice of poetry contests and reality shows hosted by several satellite television channels.

"These contests were tantamount to the practices of the Pre-Islamic Period (Jahiliyyah) that harbor feelings of hatred in the minds of people." he said.

Royal family members hail King Abdullah's initiative for poor

Several members of the Saudi royal family congratulated King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz for winning the prestigious title of "Champion in the Battle Against Hunger" for 2008 from the World Food Program (WFP).

King Abdullah was honored with the prize at the WFP Leaders' Dinner on Thursday night held in Davos, Switzerland, on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum.

Saudi Centre to launch dialogue channel

Faisal Bin Muammar, secretary general of King Abdul Aziz National Dialogue Centre of Riyadh, unveiled plans of the Centre to launch a satellite channel to promote constructive dialogue in the Saudi society in the near future.

The dialogue channel will be engaged in promoting fruitful dialogue and disseminating views and opinions of the members of the society, he said. Faisal Bin Muammar made these remarks at a ceremony hosted by Amtar Club in honor of him.

Ministry of Interior rejects easing Saudi foreign marriages

The Ministry of Interior has rejected a request by the Shoura Council for easing rules governing Saudis who marry non-Saudi women. While refusing the request, the ministry exempted elderly and disabled people from the rules in appreciation of their circumstances.

Historic sites help link generations

An exhibition of antiquities from GCC countries is being held at the National Museum in Riyadh, and it will continue till Feb. 23.There is no doubt that this region is the cradle of civilizations and rich in heritage. Prince Sultan Bin Salman Bin Abdul Aziz, Chairman of the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities (SCTA), was reported as saying recently that the Kingdom has prepared a comprehensive plan to retrieve national antiquities from abroad.

Projects 'delayed, not deferred'

Development projects in Saudi Arabia are not being deferred. Abdul Mohsen Al-Moushegah, chairman of the Al-Moushegah Group, said development projects in the oil, gas, petrochemical and energy sectors, as well as mega economic projects, are being pursued. "Due to the current economic downturn, which has not deeply affected the Kingdom, our local companies are now taking the opportunity to reschedule their projects in anticipation of the turnaround of the global economy hopefully by the end of 2009," he said during the signing of an agency agreement between Supply & Support Services Systems Co., Ltd. (S4), a local suppliers of products and services for the energy sector, and Lindner AG of Germany.

Economic Desk

Saudi to boost bank deposits if needed

The Saudi central bank will boost its deposits at banks if the need for such support arises to offset the impact of the global credit crunch on access to foreign financing, Finance Minister Ibrahim Al Assaf said.

"There is a parallel effort ... in increasing the deposits with local banks to enable them to also lend to development projects in the kingdom," Assaf told Al Arabiya television. "The problem is with foreign borrowings, there is a challenge, the problem is not with the kingdom's economy, but with international financial institutions," Assaf said.

Gaza Desk

Gul lauds King's efforts to unite Palestinians

Turkish President Abdullah Gul has lauded the efforts exerted by King Abdullah, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, to remove the mistrust among Palestinian factions and forge unity among them. Addressing the Shoura (Consultative) Council, President Gul referred to the Palestinian reconciliation conference held in Makkah convened at the initiative of King Abdullah to unify the Palestinian ranks."If the promises that were made in that holy place honored, the Palestinians would have ironed out their differences and unified their ranks," Gul said.

Unite to reinforce Arabs, King urges Palestinians

King Abdullah, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, on Saturday exhorted the Palestinians to unite since their rivalry would only lead to more dispersal than what Zionism has caused them.“As a Muslim, I beg of my Muslim brothers to renounce the devil and unite,” the King said.

The King made the heartfelt appeal during a discussion with Shoura Council members led by Chairman Dr. Saleh Bin Abdullah Bin Humaid and Vice-Chairman Dr. Bandar Bin Mohammed Hamza at Al-Yamamah Palace.

BAHRAIN

IR Desk

Arroyo talks will boost trade links

Bahrain and the Philippines yesterday signed a memorandum of understanding aimed at bolstering economic and trade ties.

It was signed by Industry and Commerce Minister Dr Hassan Fakhro and Municipalities and Agricultural Minister Dr Juma Al Ka'abi with the Philippines secretary of agriculture Arthur Yap in the presence of the Prime Minister and the Philippines President.

Filipinos hailed

Philippine President Gloria Arroyo last night praised the "heroic efforts" of the country's overseas workers in Bahrain, saying their remittances had helped to limit the impact of the global credit crunch.

"It is important to tell you all that while there are a few losing jobs, there are many more who are gaining jobs and that is how it is here in Bahrain," said President Arroyo said.

UN treaties 'breached'

BAHRAIN may have breached United Nations treaties on human rights, by blocking access to certain political websites and Internet discussion forums.

The decision appears to defy the Universal Declaration of Human Rights conventions and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which the country has signed up to, according to Bahrain Transparency Society (BTS) president Abdulnabi Al Ekri.

Social Desk

Bahrain prosecution lashes out at reports on 'prisoners of conscience'

The public prosecution on Monday lashed out at reports claiming that Bahrain had "prisoners of conscience", saying that they lacked credibility.

"We are puzzled by the statements and comments based on a report by Amnesty International about the recent arrests. A study of the report issued by the international organization, and available on the internet, proves that that there has been a deliberate or maybe unintentional mix-up that wrongly concluded there were prisoners of conscience in Bahrain," the public prosecution said.

Bahrain withdraws divisive family matters bill

Bahrain's government on Tuesday withdrew the personal status draft law from the lower house, a move likely to anger activists who have been pressuring MPs to promulgate it despite strong opposition from religious leaders.

The draft governing marriages, divorces, alimonies and all issues related to family matters was submitted last month by the government to the Islamist-dominated lower house amid disagreement over its merits.

Royal Tribute

His Majesty King Hamad yesterday paid tribute to Bahrain Defence Force on its 41st anniversary.

"The BDF is today a school for values and noble principles, a path towards development and progress," he said.

His Majesty was speaking as he opened the Shaikh Isa Royal Military College.

'Green' focus on beaches at festival

MARINE life and beaches in Barbar, Malkiya and Ma'ameer villages came under the spotlight at Bahrain's fourth environment festival held at the Barbar Club, Manama.

The presentations, given by environmentalists, were followed by the screening of short film Sea People Talk, produced by the Bahrain Environment Society (BES) and directed by Yousif Al Zeera from the Environmental Films Voluntary Organisation.

New budget fears as talks collapse

Budget talks between MPs and the government collapsed yesterday, casting serious doubts over Bahrain's spending for the next two years.

A parliamentary committee decided to call off negotiations with the Finance Ministry four days before they were originally due to conclude. It will recommend that MPs vote against approving the budget when they next meet on Tuesday.

Minister opens the first 'green' expo

Prime Minister Shaikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa yesterday delegated Industry and Commerce Minister Dr Hassan Fakhro to open the first Bahrain International Natural Health Products and Green Expo.

The three-day event is being held at the Bahrain International Exhibition Centre and is being organised by the Bahrain Exhibitions and Conventions Authority in co-operation with the US-based Mind, Body and Beyond.

Economic Desk

MPs' spending plan 'threat to economy'

MPs' plans to increase spending pose a serious risk to Bahrain's economy during the global credit crunch, it was claimed yesterday.

The warning came from Finance Minister Shaikh Ahmed bin Mohammed Al Khalifa after talks over the 2009-2010 budget collapsed.

Gaza Desk

Dawn of a charity era

Bahrain's New Dawn Society has raised BD2,000 following a charity campaign in support of the people of Gaza.

The organisation's stalls at the Al A'ali Mall and Bahrain City Centre welcomed more than 500 visitors, who bought handmade crafts such as calendars and bookmarks and made personal donations.

Travel warning to Bahrainis

Bahrain's ambassador to Egypt has warned Bahrainis not to try to travel to Gaza, saying that the Egyptian authorities would not allow them to enter the Strip and that they would end up stranded at the Rafah border posts.

"The Egyptian foreign ministry has informed that the Rafah border posts would be closed to all people, regardless of their status and mission, and that only medical teams would be allowed inside the Strip. The ban applies to architects, parliamentarians and journalists," Khalil Al Dhawadi said.

Red tape delays Gaza mission

ANOTHER group of Bahraini doctors returned home from Gaza yesterday, but were unable to bring any Palestinian patients with them because the required paperwork is still not ready.

Bahrain Medical Society vice-chairman and consultant surgeon Dr Ali Mirza Al Qayim, brain and neural consultant surgeon Dr Taha Al Dirazi, intensive care consultant, Dr Qassim Omran and paediatric surgeon Dr Mahmood Asghar arrived in Bahrain after five days of intense work in the Gaza Strip.

Setback to Gaza mercy mission

THREE Bahraini MPs due to deliver BD150,000 in cash to Gaza yesterday had to postpone their trip after being told they would not be allowed to cross the border from Egypt.

They said the Egyptian Foreign Ministry had contacted them on Friday to say that the Rafah border crossing had been closed.

Meanwhile, volunteer doctors inside Gaza have been advised by Egyptian officials to leave before Thursday - or face being stranded there.

Doctors end Gaza visit

A BAHRAIN team of doctors has been forced to retreat from Gaza, over fears they could be stuck there if fighting breaks out again after a ceasefire officially ends on Thursday. But patients they identified as candidates for treatment in Bahrain have already been moved to the safety of hospitals in Egypt.

The five-man Bahrain Medical Society (BMS) delegation, which left Bahrain last Tuesday to continue the aid mission in war-torn Gaza, returned to Egypt yesterday.

want to bring to Bahrain, if we got out now."

UAE

IR Desk

UAE signs air services pact with Philippines

The UAE has signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Philippines to increase flights between the countries.

The two sides designated Emirates Airline, Etihad Airways, Air Arabia, RAK Airways and Fly Dubai national carriers from the UAE. Both parties agreed to a phased increase of 89 weekly passenger flights.

Iran's war of words against UAE 'unjustified'

Dr Anwar Mohammad Gargash, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, said that Iran's escalating war of words against the UAE does not serve the existing relations between the two countries, as such escalation is neither understandable nor justified.

"This kind of escalation (a war of words) does not, in anyway, serve the existing relations between the two countries," Gargash said in an interview with the Dubai-based Al Arabiya satellite station. The interview was aired on Friday

Australians celebrate their growing presence in the UAE

Australians in the UAE capital expressed their satisfaction with the growing presence of their community and greater interaction with locals and other communities with the regular social activities.

"The number of Australians is increasing in the UAE and they have become socially very active with our organisation. Aussies Abroad, the community organisations of Australian expatiates in Abu Dhabi is not restricted to our community only; we have members of seven other nationalities," Mohanned Hourani, president of the organisation, said.

Hamdan to attend African Union meet

Shaikh Hamdan Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Deputy Ruler of Dubai and Minister of Finance, will leave for the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa today in response to an official invitation from the leadership of the 12th summit of the heads of states and governments of the African Union, being held from February 1 to 3.

Shaikh Hamdan will be honoured during the summit in recognition of his charitable and humanitarian initiatives which saved over 13,000 children living in 20 African countries from illiteracy and ignorance.

Sharjah Ruler receives Emir’s letter

Member of the Supreme Council of the United Arab Emirates and Ruler of Sharjah Dr Sheikh Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi yesterday received a letter from the Emir H H Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani. The letter was handed over by Qatar’s Ambassador to the UAE H E Abdullah Mohammed Al Othman.

Pakistan minister hails decision by UAE to donate power plant

The UAE has given a 320-megawatt used power plant to Pakistan to help the country overcome its energy crisis.

Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari arrived in the UAE on Monday to attend the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signing ceremony in Abu Dhabi today.

"The UAE government has not only donated the plant but has kindly consented to bear the cost of dismantling, transportation and installation in Pakistan," said a senior diplomat at the Pakistan Embassy in Abu Dhabi.

Obama nod likely for UAE nuke deal

In her final days as secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice signed a nuclear-energy accord with the UAE, calling the measure "a powerful and timely model for the world."

President Barack Obama is likely to agree.

The deal is designed to assist the UAE in starting a nuclear-power industry that can't be converted into a weapon-making enterprise.

UAE Vice President holds talks with President of Ireland

His Highness Shaikh Mohammad Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, on Wednesday held talks with President of Ireland Mary McAleese on a host of issues dealing with knowledge, tourism, and joint investment.

Shaikh Mohammad and the Irish president exchanged views on bilateral relations and ways to develop them in the areas of economy, tourism and joint investment

UAE and Bahrain renew marine resources pact

Marine resources, including fish stocks in UAE-Bahrain waters, are expected to improve with the joint measures due to be taken under a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed by Abu Dhabi and Bahrain authorities in Abu Dhabi on Tuesday evening, officials said.

The MoU, signed by the Environment Agency-Abu Dhabi (EAD) and the General Directorate for the Protection of Marine Resources (GDPMR) of Kingdom of Bahrain, envisages cooperation in the fields of wildlife, fisheries and marine environment.

UAE 'can help make a difference'

Michel Montas, spokeswoman for UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon, stressed the importance of the Gulf states in solving a number of problems facing the Middle East.

"The secretary-general has been receiving positive feedback from the UAE government and depends on the UAE greatly to help make a difference and play an active role in the peace process," she said.

Social Desk

UAE considering establishment of crisis committee

The United Arab Emirates is considering the establishment of an emergency committee to deal with the impact of the global financial crisis, the Ministry of Economy said yesterday.

The committee would involve the Ministry of Economy, economic departments, municipalities and the public and private sectors, the ministry said in a statement.

Mohammmad offers condolences

General Shaikh Mohammad bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces, on Friday offered condolences to Al Khuyaili family on the death of Suhail Khamis Al Khuyaili.

Dr. Mugheer Khamis Al Khuyaili, Director General of the Abu Dhabi Education Council, and Hamad Bin Suhail Al Khuyaili received Shaikh Mohammed during the visit.

Hamdan highlights UAE role in helping the poor

The UAE always stands ready to relieve the suffering of sister and friendly countries hit by natural disasters, armed conflicts or drought, Shaikh Hamdan Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, UAE Minister of Finance and Deputy Ruler of Dubai, told the African Union Summit on Monday.

"The UAE, under the leadership of President His Highness Shaikh Khalifa Bin Zayed Al Nahyan and His Highness Shaikh Mohammad Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, spares no effort and funds to give a helping hand to sister and friendly countries in need," Shaikh Hamdan said.

Ministry survey to bring in more transparency

The household income and expenditure survey by the UAE Ministry of Economy will bring transparency and high level of disclosure in the economy, an economist said.

Working with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to develop statistical instruments, the ministry has released the results of a survey that covered the income and expenditure of the country's households between April 2007 and 2008.

Economic Desk

UAE should use wealth fund to revive economy: Advisory chief

The United Arab Emirates should spend part of its sovereign wealth fund to revive the economy and must delay property projects as demand vanishes, the head of its advisory council said yesterday.

Abdul Aziz al-Ghurair, speaker of the Federal National Council (FNC) which advises the rulers, also said the government must inject more liquidity to boost the economy but banks were sound due to their high capital adequacy ratios.

UAE proposes fresh initiatives to tackle crisis

The UAE Ministry of Economy has proposed a new set of initiatives to strengthen the economy and minimise the impact of the global financial crisis, including setting up of a common emergency committee and stronger transparency norms.

At a high-level meeting of heads of economic departments in Abu Dhabi chaired by the UAE Minister of Economy, Sultan Bin Saeed Al Mansouri, the officials discussed the need for new mechanisms to facilitate bank deposits that will encourage business growth.

Call to inject more liquidity

The UAE should spend part of its sovereign wealth fund to revive the economy and must delay property projects as demand vanishes, said Abdul Aziz Al Ghurair, speaker of the Federal National Council (FNC).

He also said the government must inject more liquidity to boost the economy but banks were sound due to their high capital adequacy ratios

Lubna stresses strength of UAE economy

UAE Foreign Trade Minister Shaikha Lubna Al Qasimi stressed the strength of UAE economy and its preparedness to deal with potential impact of the World Financial Crisis on local economy.

Speaking at the World Economic forum on Saturday here, she cited a number of procedures taken by the UAE to immunise the national economy and boost ability of the banking system amid current global financial crunch.

Gulf shares fall as oil prices ease, economies weaken

Gulf shares fell as the International Monetary Fund cut its economic growth forecast for the United Arab Emirates after oil prices tumbled.

The IMF cut its economic growth forecast for the UAE by almost half after oil prices and the value of overseas investments plummeted, according to a draft report.

Gaza Desk

Aid continues to pour in for hapless Gaza victims

Donations and aid from across the UAE raised for Palestinians was timely and generous and was assisted by coverage in Gulf News, volunteers said here on Friday.

More than Dh1 million was donated to the Abu Dhabi-Palestinian Children's Relief Fund (AD-PCRF) in the last month.

OMAN

IR Desk

Oman crude rises after Saudi Arabia hikes prices

Oman crude oil, an Arabian Gulf benchmark for Asia, rose after Saudi Arabia increased prices of its supplies, requiring refiners to seek alternative grades.

Cargoes of Oman for loading in April were offered at a discount of 50 cents (Dh1.84) a barrel to benchmark Dubai, up from a discount of $1 a barrel last month, said three traders who participate in the market.

"April cargoes should see a premium much like March," said Beni Yoshida, a trader at Idemitsu Kosan Co in Tokyo. "The Saudis have cut their heavy grades, so there will be an impact there too."

Al Rowas receives Italian guests

Abdulaziz bin Mohammed al Rowas, Adviser to His Majesty the Sultan for Cultural Affairs, received here yesterday Lucia Tongergi, Deputy Vice Chancellor of the Italian University of Pisa, and Alessandra Avanzini, Head of the Italian Archaeological Mission in the Sultanate. They discussed the archaeological excavations programme in Salout in the Wilayat of Bahla in the Al Dakhliyah region and Khor Ruri in the Governorate of Dhofar.

Oman to attend Saudi forum on social responsibility

The Sultanate, represented by the Ministry of Social Development, will take part in a three-day forum on social partnership and responsibility between the private and public sectors which begins in Saudi Arabia today. The forum, which takes the theme Our Society is Our Responsibility, is held under the patronage of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al Saud.

Al Sulaimi in talks with Moroccan minister

Yahya bin Saud al Sulaimi, Minister of Education, received here yesterday Jamal Aghmani, Employment and Vocational Training Minister of Morocco. They discussed aspects of educational co-operation.

Minister receives German guests

Shaikh Abdullah bin Salim al Rowas, Minister of Regional Municipalities and Water Resources, received here yesterday Dr Christian Von, Agriculture and Environment Minister of the German state of Schleswig Holstein, and his delegation. They discussed issues of mutual interest and means of enhancing co-operation and exchange of expertise in municipal and hydro fields.

Al Hinai's message for Libyan official

Mostafa Mohammed Abdul Jalil, Secretary-General of the Public People Committee for Justice in Libya, has received a written message from Shaikh Mohammed bin Abdullah al Hinai, Minister of Justice. The message was delivered by Dr Qasim bin Mohammed al Salhi, Oman's Ambassador to Libya, when the Libyan official received him here yesterday. The message includes enhancing means of bilateral co-operation in justice and exchange of specialised judicial and academic expertise.

Ministers, RAO commander receive S African officer

Gen Ali bin Majid al Maamari, Minister of Royal Office, received here yesterday Lt Gen Solly Zacharia Shoke, South African Army Chief of Staff. They exchanged views on matters of common concern. The meeting was attended by the Commander of the Royal Army of Oman and the Secretary-General of Military Affairs at the Royal Office

Oman, Morocco seek ways to enhance relations

Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Secretary-General of the Foreign Ministry, received here yesterday Jamal Aghmani, Moroccan Minister of Employment and Vocational Training, who is leading his country's delegation at the third session of the Omani-Moroccan Joint Committee meetings. They discussed ways of enhancing economic, investment, industrial, cultural and educational co-operation.

Oman-German investment forum held

An investment forum on opportunities for joint ventures between the Oman and German private sectors was held yesterday. Khalil bin Abdullah al Khonji, OCCI Chairman, led the Omani side and the German minister of agriculture and environment led the German side. Businessmen from the two countries attended.

Social Desk

Statistics Consultative Committee meets

The Statistics Consultative Committee yesterday held a meeting under the chairmanship of Mohammed bin Nasser al Khusaibi, Secretary-General of the National Economy Ministry and the committee head. The meeting discussed progress of implementation of its decisions and reviewed a report on the outcome of statisticians' enumeration at government units, identify their training requirements during June-December, 2008 and training courses guide in 2009.

ESO hosted a talk on global warming

The Environment Society of Oman (ESO) hosted a talk on Global Warming: Turning Carbon Dioxide Emissions into Rock at the PDO Oil and Gas Exhibition Centre. Dr Juerg M Matter,

Associate Research Scientist at the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory of Columbia University, delivered a speech on the topic.

Financial Affairs and Energy Resources Council meets

Financial Affairs and Energy Resources Council, which met yesterday under the chairmanship of Ahmed bin Abdulnabi Macki, Minister of National Economy and Deputy Chairman of the Financial Affairs and Energy Resources Council, discussed areas of external investment on offer against the backdrop of the current economic and financial crisis.

Ministers of health session ends in Sanaa

Dr Ali bin Mohammed bin Musa, Minister of Health, returned from Yemen yesterday after heading Oman's delegation to the 66th session of the GCC ministerial council there. The meeting discussed primary healthcare, family medicine, central drug registration, diabetes an other subjects.

Majlis organises workshop on performance development

A two-day workshop on 'Excellence Model EFQM (European Foundation for Quality Management) for the development of the performance of government institutions' began under the auspices of Majlis Addawla here yesterday. The workshop is an attempt to upgrade and update government departments to deliver the best possible services to its citizens as also for the overall growth of the country.

Gaza Desk

Gaza fundraising drive picks up momentum

The nationwide fundraising drive launched recently to help Palestinian victims of the 22-day Israeli war has picked up momentum, according to Nada al Jamali of Dar al Atta. In an exclusive interview with the Observer, she said Dar al Atta (House of Giving) and Oman Charitable Organisation (OCO) teamed up recently to co-ordinate the Sultanate's fundraising drive for the victims of the three-week brutal Israeli war on Gaza.

Gaza donation campaign

Under the slogan 'Together to Support Gaza', Oman Mobile launched a campaign to collect donations for Gaza reconstruction. The campaign will continue till March 2. Zuwaina bint Sultan

al Rashdia, Senior Manager of Corporate Branding and Media at Oman Telecommunications Company, said, "In co-operation with Oman Charitable Organisation, Oman Mobile has launched a humanitarian campaign to collect donations in support of the Gaza Strip population and reconstruction efforts, through SMS messages for one month."

QATAR

IR Desk

Emir approves MoU with Saudi

The Emir H H Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani issued yesterday an instrument of ratification approving a memorandum of understanding on political consultation and coordination between the foreign ministries of Qatar and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, signed in Riyadh on December 16, 2008. The Emir also issued an instrument ratifying a memorandum of understanding on cultural and information cooperation between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, signed inged in Riyadh on the same day.

Minister meets US officials

The Minister of State for Foreign Affairs H E Ahmad bin Abdullah Al Mahmoud met here yesterday with Head of Sudan Programme Group at the US State Department Timothy Shortley and his accompanying delegation. They exchanged views on the peace process in Darfur. The meeting was attended by US Ambassador to Qatar Joseph Evan LeBaron and a number of Foreign Ministry officials.

MoU with Japanese power firm renewed

The Deputy Premier and Minister of Energy and Industry H E Abdullah bin Hamad Al Attiyah has renewed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the partnership with Chubu Electric Power Company in Japan.

As per the MoU, the Japanese company Chubu will advise Qatar General Electricity and Water Corporation (Kahramaa) on power system technology with regard to stability, ancillary services; including voltage and reactive power. The Chubu will also impart training that matching to international standard to the Kahramaa staff.

Brisbane team explores trade ties

A trade delegation from Brisbane is in Doha to explore new avenues for promotion of bilateral trade between the Australian state capital of Queensland and Qatar.

"Our objective is to explore mutual beneficial trade and economic opportunities and we are interested in a long term economic and cultural relationship between Brisbane and

Qatar," Brisbane Councilor, Lord Mayor Campbell Newman told yesterday at the Qatar Chamber of Commerce and Industry which hosted the delegation.

UK transport centre to set up lab at QSTP

UK's Transport Research Laboratory (TRL), which offers the latest technology that would help reduce traffic accidents in the city's thoroughfares, will be established at the Qatar Science and Technology Park (QSTP) Khaled Hassan, TRL country manager, said. The TRL will develop innovative processes and technologies in road transport in the wake of Qatar's rapid physical growth.

H E the Prime Minister meets Turkish Premier

The Prime Minister and Foreign Minister H E Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem bin Jabor Al Thani met in Ankara yesterday Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. They discussed ties between the two counties as well as the latest developments in the Middle East.

Benin president arrives in Doha

The President of Benin Dr Thomas Boni Yayi and his accompanying delegation arrived in Doha yesterday. The Minister of State for Energy and Industry Affairs, H E Dr Mohammed bin Saleh Al Sada who is also head of the accompanying mission of honour and Benin Ambassador to Qatar H E Eissa Mouse Toure welcomed the President and the accompanying delegation at Doha International Airport.

Minister meets Japanese official

The Minister of State for Foreign Affairs H E Ahmed bin Abdullah Al Mahmoud held talks with the senior adviser at the Japanese Foreign Ministry Kitaro Sato, who is also in charge of the peace process in Africa. They exchanged views on the peace process in Darfur.

Italy explores tourism ties with Qatar

A strong bilateral relations between Qatar and Italy in terms of tourism is expected to rise as the Italian delegation laid the first stone of cooperation during their brief visit in Doha. Aside from expanding bilateral economic relations with Qatar, the delegation was in Doha to start a profitable cooperation in line with tourism industry. .

"The responsibility for tourism given to me by Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi is a great challenge I have to rise to, since tourism is one of the pillars of our economy and

has to be enhanced on all levels," said Brambilla, Under-secretary of State in Charge of Tourism .

Italy to take part in Doha Cultural Fest

The Italian Embassy said it has prepared some big events for the Doha Cultural Festival from February 28 to March 9.

"We have planned some specific events for this festival – big events. But we haven't finalised them yet. The Doha Cultural Festival is a grand occasion, so we have definitely prepared for it," said Ambassador Andrea Ferrarri.

The eagle has landed

A team of six US space mission crew members visited the US base in Al Sailaya here yesterday. The STS-126 space mission crew was visiting the US service members in the Middle East and Germany, to show support while sharing experiences during their November 2008 space mission.

The two-week trip is a first for Armed Forces Entertainment, a report posted by the Area Support Group Qatar Public Affairs Office of the base said.

Qatari-Saudi border panel reaches two agreements

The joint Qatari-Saudi committee for demarcation of land and maritime borders at its meeting yesterday reached agreements on the choice of the global companies that will be called for the demarcation process, as well as on the method of implementation of the boundary markers.

This was disclosed by Morayyea Hassan Al Shahrani, Director of Saudi General Directorate of Military Survey. The joint committee held its second meeting at Doha Sheraton Hotel yesterday.

Qatar welcomes president election in Somalia

Qatar has welcomed the election of Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed as the President of Somalia, an official source at the Foreign Ministry said.

QAPCO contract to ship ethylene awarded to Norwegian company

Qatar Petrochemical Company (QAPCO) has awarded a contract of Affreightment (COA) to Norwegian gas shipping company Norgas Carrier for shipping its ethylene.

Dr Mohamed Yousuf Al-Mulla, QAPCO General Manager, Terje Orehagen, President and COO signed the agreement. Also present at the signing ceremony were Abdulrahman Ali Abdullah, QAPCO Group Manager and Norgas CEO, Morits Skaugen.

QAPCO to sell $35m worth surplus ethylene to Marubeni

Qatar Petrochemical Company (QAPCO) has recently signed a $35m contract with Marubeni Corporation of Japan to sell a portion of its surplus ethylene. Dr Mohamed Yousef Al-Mulla, General Manager of QAPCO, expressed the company's delight to be in partnership with Marubeni Corporation for the supply of ethylene.

QAPCO had shipped about 35 per cent of its ethylene in 2008 to various end-users in Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines and Venezuela through Marubeni.

Social Desk

Most cancers are curable, conference told

The Al Amal Hospital First Cancer Conference opened at Sheraton yesterday has brought a huge number of cancer experts. Specialists from the US, Canada, UK, France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon are addressing the conference.

"Despite the fact many cancers are curable and preventable; people still fear being diagnosed of cancer. Most of the prevalent and major cancers can now be cured bringing new hope and longer life expectancies to fearful patients," Dr Hanan Al Kuwari, HMC Managing Director said inaugurating the conference.

No meningitis cases in Qatar, says ministry

The Ministry of Health has denied reports in a section of the media about a possible outbreak of meningitis disease in the country. In a statement issued yesterday, the Ministry said a report published by a local Arabic daily in its February 4 issue in this regard was baseless.

"There is no outbreak of meningitis in the country. The cases of meningitis are well within their normal limit," said the statement.

National research survey released

A comprehensive survey of Qatari research dating from 1970-2007 has been released online by the Qatar National Research Fund (QNRF). The Biannual National Research Survey (BNRS) is the first in the country where all existing Qatar research records professional, academic, undergraduate and commercial have been collected and archived.

Deputy Prime Minister meets Maersk CEO

The Deputy Premier and Minister of Energy and Industry, H E Abdullah bin Hamad Al Attiyah received yesterday at Qatar Petroleum Headquarters, Nils Smedegaard Andresen, CEO of A.P Moller – Maersk, and Thomson Thune Anderson, CEO of Maersk Oil and Gas.

Talks during the meeting covered bilateral relations between QP and Moller- Maersk and means to enhance them in the future, mainly in oil, gas and Gas to Liquids ventures

Al Harm is 'flower of the year'

Zygophyllum qatarense, popularly known as Al Harm, has been announced as the flower of the year by the Friends of the Environment (FEC). Al Harm was chosen as the 'flower 2009' under FEC's annual "A Flower Each Spring" programme. Announcing the name of the flower, Dr Saif Al Hajri, Chairperson, FEC said here yesterday that Al Harm shrub is important in Qatar's flora.

Under the programme "A Flower Each Spring", the FEC will launch a year-long campaign to highlight the importance of the flower.

Economic Desk

QIB posts QR1.64bn profit

DOHA: Reporting robust financials for 2008, the Qatar Islamic Bank, the country's largest Islamic banking entity, reported net profits to the tune of QR1.64bn, representing a 30.8 percent growth over 2007. The profit in 2007 was QR1.25bn. The bank also announced it plans to launch a rights issue to raise its capital by 10 percent.

The bank was rated as one of the best three investment choices among GCC stocks for 2009. It was also awarded 'Best Islamic Real Estate House' and 'Most Improved House' by Euromoney, and 'Best Financing Bank in Qatar' by ICG, Jaidah said

Waiting it out

Although the impact of the global financial turbulence on Qatar is the least as compared to its neighbours, some construction companies are laying off staff to cut costs. According to sources

in the trade and industry circles, some of these companies are 'relieving' their employees asking them to come back when the situation improves.

"It's kind of long leave, albeit without pay, for the workers being relieved (laid off). It's an arrangement which is convenient for both, the company and its employees. They have the option to return when the situation has improved," said a source.

Gulf states have strong balance sheets: AXA Group chief economist

The excess of leverage on the Gulf countries' property market is likely to be significantly reduced which will probably give stronger resilience to their economies once the global economy starts to grow again, according AXA Group Chief Economist.

The Gulf countries' economies have strong balance sheets in terms of reserves and assets to resist global recession, Eric Chaney told a news conference here yesterday at the Qatar Financial Centre (QFC).

Qatar sees 10pc growth this year

Qatar is projected to register a growth of around 10 percent in real terms in 2009 which would make it one of the world's fastest growing economies this year, Minister of State for Energy and Industry Affairs, H E Dr Mohammed bin Saleh Al Sada, said here yesterday.

"Qatar, therefore, remains one of the safest and healthiest environments for long-term investment," he said at the stone laying ceremony of the Energy City Qatar corporate headquarters in Lusail.

Gaza Desk

Qatar was right in calling summit: Mousa

Arab League Secretary General Amr Mousa said that Qatar was right in its call to hold an Arab summit on Gaza on January 16. Mousa said in a statement to Al Jazeera Channel that the summit should have been held but it did not reach the quorum because of the conflicting positions of some countries. Qatar held "Gaza emergency summit" with participation of leaders and representatives of a number of Arab and Islamic countries to discuss the situation in Gaza Strip in the wake of Israel's devastating three-week offensive

Israeli threats to Al Jazeera unacceptable: Media Centre

Harsh measures against journalists from the Al Jazeera TV news network announced by Israel yesterday are unacceptable, the Doha Centre for Media Freedom said. An Israeli official, who asked not to be named, said employees of the network would not have their visas renewed. The measures were the result of recent decisions by Qatar, he added.

Fund-raising concert for Gaza children

The 101-piece Qatar Philharmonic Orchestra (QPO) is all set for its benefit concert entirely dedicated for the children affected by the conflict in Gaza. A press conference for the event was organised yesterday with a panel comprising Qatar Foundation Vice Chairman Dr Saif Al Hajri, QPO Managing Director Kurt Meister and QPO Music Director and Resident Composer Marcel Khalife addressing the media at the Qatar Foundation Headquarters.

RasGas donates QR1.25m to Gaza fund

RasGas Company Limited (RasGas) recently handed over QR1.25m donation to Reach Out To Asia (ROTA). The amount came from RasGas' companywide fundraising initiative to help families suffering in Gaza.

IBQ sponsors charity event in Al Khor

The International Bank of Qatar (IBQ) is sponsoring the Al Khor association of Qatargas and Rasgas employees' community charity bazaar aimed at raising funds for Gaza victims. The event, which is one of the many programmes within the Reach Out To Asia (ROTA) organisation's charitable campaigns, began yesterday.

"Giving our support to initiatives like the Al Khor community charity bazaar aligns with our strong commitment to play an active role in the community we serve." said Peter Wilkes, Deputy General Manager at IBQ.

Nation News in Brief: NHRC to hold conference on Palestine

The National Human Rights Committee (NHRC) jointly with the Arab Democracy Foundation will organise an international conference on Palestine in Doha from February 22 to February 24. The conference aims to establish a framework for coordination between international humanitarian groups and find ways to protect the Palestinian rights. International legal experts and representatives from organisations that have been mobilising support for the Palestinians will attend the conference.

Qatar International School raises cash for Gaza aid appeal

Qatar International School organised a series of charity events to raise money for the Reach Out to Asia Al Fakhoora appeal geared towards helping children affected by the conflict in Gaza.

The weeklong charity events, which involved the students, included a doughnut sale a movie night and a 'black and white' day. The event raised over QR11,000 for the appeal.

Call for partnership in rebuilding war-torn Gaza

Representatives of non-government organisations (NGOs) from over 30 countries sat at one table to discuss the role of partnership and coordination in rebuilding war-torn Gaza, yesterday at the Millennium Hotel.

"Partnership should be present between NGOs and international non-government organisations (INGOs)," said Dr Hany El Banna, Chairman of the Humanitarian Forum and President of Islamic Relief Worldwide, who chaired the opening session.

Al Jazeera English to air appeal for Gaza relief

Al Jazeera English has pledged to run public service announcements on UK prime time on Al Jazeera English in support of the appeal of Disasters Emergency Committee's humanitarian aid initiative for the victims of Gaza hostilities. The channel will not charge any sum for the service.

Brendan Gormley, chief executive of the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC), said the Gaza Crisis Appeal was launched as the devastation wrought in the Gazan territory was so huge that British aid agencies were compelled to act. "We are pleased with Al Jazeera's support to broadcast the humanitarian aid appeal announcements," he said.

KUWAIT

IR Desk

Kuwait follows US policy on detainees

The manager of the follow up and coordination department at the Foreign Ministry, Ambassador Khalid Al-Moghamis, said he appreciated the step taken by the new US president Barack Obama concerning the closure of Guantanamo prison.

Al-Moghamis added that the ministry was currently conducting direct, official contacts with US counterparts to discuss the handing over of four Kuwaiti detainees to be tried in Kuwait in the case they were proven guilty of involvement in terrorism.

Social Desk

Kuwait to vote on law to punish abuse of foreign workers

Kuwait's parliament is set to vote on a bill that lays down tough penalties for employers abusing foreign worker after US criticism and violent protests by Asian labourers, but critics say it will not achieve much.

The move follows protests last year by hundreds of mainly Bangladeshi workers demanding better pay and conditions. Many said they could not live on their salaries after employers deducted housing, meal and health care costs.

Kuwait fund reduces global exposure

The Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA), the Gulf Arab state's sovereign wealth fund, has reduced exposure to global stock markets since October, shifting assets instead into short-term cash funds, a government report said.

In a briefing to parliament, the government said KIA had cut the ratio of international share investments in a key fund in a bid to minimize the effect of the global financial crisis on Kuwait, the world's seventh-largest oil exporter, according to a copy of the report.

Kuwaiti minister: Stimulus plan will restore confidence in finance sector

Kuwait's finance minister was quoted as saying on Sunday that an economic stimulus package will "plant confidence" in the country's financial and banking sectors.

Mostafa Al Shimali told Al Watan daily that the bill will allow banks to save troubled companies and will guarantee bank facilities to companies.

Islamist MPs plan to question PM

Islamist members of Kuwait's parliament said on Tuesday they plan to submit a request to question the prime minister of the state, just months after the cabinet resigned over a similar request by lawmakers.

The request is the latest in a row between parliament and the cabinet which has threatened the approval of economic bills aimed at attracting investment and helping limit the impact of a global financial crisis in the Opec member.

Economic Desk

Kuwait approves rescue plan amid political dispute

Kuwait approved yesterday a new rescue plan to shore up confidence in the economy including state guarantees for banks and “ways to help troubled firms”, amid a global credit crisis hitting the OPEC producer.

“The cabinet has approved the draft law in its final form and .... decided to send it to parliament,” the cabinet said after a meeting in a statement. Parliament is expected to debate the package on Tuesday, when deputies are scheduled to discuss the impact of the financial crisis on the OPEC member.

Cabinet studies rescue plans

The Kuwaiti cabinet yesterday held an extraordinary meeting at Bayan Palace under the chairmanship of His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah. Following the meeting, Deputy Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, and Acting Oil Minister Sheikh Mohammad Al-Sabah, who also doubles as Acting Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs, said the cabinet had completed the discussion of a draft law put forward by an executive economic team charged with finding ways to alleviate the negative effects of the current global economic crisis.

The bill, which the cabinet members studied in detail, aims to strengthen financial stability in the country, he said.

Kuwait grapples with impact of global economic crisis

"There has been a 30 percent drop in sales of automobiles and electronic appliances due to the economic crisis," said Ahmed Salikh, the manager of a prominent business group in Kuwait. "Retail businesses of white and brown goods have taken a toll," he continued. "Corporate tenders have fallen and public projects for roads and harbors have also shown a significant decline," he said.

BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

SOUTH EAST ASIA

Tatheer Zahra Sherazi

Monitoring Report

From 30January 6 February

Presentation February 11, 2009

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- Indonesian president inaugurates 15 ambassadors
- Indonesian 'ulamas' hopeful about Obama

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Economic Front

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- Japan to give Indonesia $2.1 mln loan for energy co-op
- Indonesia's BNI Aims to Sell $50 Million Sukuk in Malaysia
- Indon retail Islamic bonds
- Indonesia to subsidize public housing with 2.5 trillion rupiahs
- Four face charges in Indonesia central bank graft case
- Indonesia's silent voters being heard
- Minister: Indonesia secures $6 bln standby loans

- Present global crisis won't affect growing relations between RI and India

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- Indonesia: Muhammadiyah ready to help Rohingyas
- `Fatwa on abstention won't affect voters'

- Indonesia to Repatriate Burmese Migrants
- Kin of Indonesian president in corruption trial
- Indonesia Prosecutors Want Life For Bank's Ex-Official

- Malaysia

Political Front

- Look East Policy Enhanced Japan-Msia's Relation, Says Ambassador

- Malaysia ruling coalition claims state power grab
- Malaysian DPM confirms Perak defections, BN to form new state government
- Don't be picky about jobs: Abdullah
- Only 41% think Najib will be good PM: Survey

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- Malaysia to build 25,000 low-cost houses
- Malaysia's second astronaut's mission extended.
- Japan Scraps Most Duties On Malaysian Products
- Next Malaysian PM uses blog to form economic policy
- Raise fuel subsidy for transport operators
- Malaysia budget deficit may top 5pc this year
- Top Malaysia banker wants review of race policy
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- Philippine

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- Lessons from Obama campaign for RP presidential bets

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- ADB to Help Philippines Save $100 Million Yearly Fuel Cost by Using Energy-Efficient Lights
- Philippines to help Brunei to develop agricultural sector

- Brunei to export IT products to Philippines

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- Brunei to send more peacekeepers to S Philippines (pol,eco)
- Muslim rebels turn to extortion: military
- Arroyo to Discuss Rights, More Job Opportunities for Filipinos in Bahrain
- More Filipinos expecting better life in 2009, reports SWS
- 800,000 jobless Filipinos?
- Ebola virus hits more pig farmers in the Philippines
- ANC Mindanao forum: Expert group proposed for RP-MILF talks
- Navy officer says Basilan situation getting worse
- Philippines government concerned over Mindanao kidnappings
- Philippine military poised to rescue hostages
- West Papua Camp Demolitioned By Indonesia Police
- Indonesian president calls on Chinese ethnic to make efforts for country's development
- Indonesian president calls on Chinese ethnic to make efforts for country's development.

- Thailand

Political Front

- Pressures mount on new Thai PM
- Thai neighbours silent on Rohingyas:
- ● Thailand’s divisions have dominated its politics for the past three years.

Strategic Front

Economic Front

- Thailand parliament approves economic stimulus package
- Thailand looks to scrap visa fees to boost tourism
- Tourism groups forecast 14 million
- Economist magazine blocked in Thailand again
- Thai gov't suspends foreign workers' registration
- Thai army officer: soldiers not assigned to blend in with protesters during Saturday mass rally

Social Front

- Thai Deputy PM: Police would take action if anti-gov't protesters break laws
- UNHCR wants transparent investigation

- Junta denies Rohingya boat people are from Burma
- Thousands of Thai police to be deployed at pro-Thaksin rally

- Singapore

Political Front

- S'pore, Indonesia working out details of border agreement signing ceremony

Strategic Front

- Singapore to mark 25 years of total defence on Feb 15.

Economic Front

- Budget meant to have multiplier effect on whole economy

- Singapore shares close 0.39% higher
- Economic downturn presents opportunities for entrepreneurs

- Singapore firms in strong position to survive crisis
- S'pore partners WEF and others to form Global Cooperation System
- PM Lee urges S'poreans to be confident about future despite downturn
- Singapore must be disciplined about reserves: SM Goh
- Slight increase in road fatalities in 2008, motorcyclists remain most vulnerable

- Saving jobs will have bigger impact in boosting Singapore economy
- Singapore's employment growth slows, jobless rate up at 2.6% in Q4

- EDB's survey shows poor business sentiment in manufacturing and services sectors

Social Front

- Online network set up to share flu pandemic info with doctors Vietnam

Political Front

- Obama's 'Vietnam' strategy
- Gov’t orders smooth implementation of ASEAN charter

Strategic Front

Economic Front

- Vietnam PM says no need to devalue dong
- Vietnam PM forecasts economy to recover by May
- Gov’t reduces petrol import taxes by 10 percent
- Analyst sees declining oil production in Vietnam
- Vietnam stock market hits three-year low

Social Front

- China to provide free aid to DPRK

- Laos

Political Front

Economic Front

- Consultation meeting to address financial crisis in tourism sector held

Social Front

- Enhancing the capacity of the Lao PDR to participate in the international legal system

- Cambodia

Political Front

Strategic Front

- Border talks deadlock, again

Economic Front

- Exports offered $1.6m boost
- PM lashes out at developed world, donors over crisis
- PM presses for 6pc growth.

Social Front

Environmental Front

- Govt denies mismanaging resources

- Migrant worker jobs hit by regional unemployment

Summary

This week situation again there is similarity and continuity in news on of this region.

At political front Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono inaugurated 15 ambassadors on Friday while in Malaysia, Malaysia's ruling coalition claimed it wrested control of a key state from the opposition.In coming elections the approval rating of Malaysia's incoming prime minister, Datuk Seri Najib Razak, continues to fall, amid increasing unhappiness among Malaysians over the government's handling of important issues in recent months. Cambodian and Thai negotiators have again failed to reach an agreement to end a long-running dispute over their shared border, but say new talks will be held in mid-April.

At economic front The Malaysian government will build at least 25,000 low-cost houses nationwide this year through the economic stimulus package launched by the government recently. While the Budget deficit this year is likely to exceed five per cent due to increased government spending, resulting from pump priming, to spur the economy. For development in economy according to a top banker Malaysia must review its race-based economic policies if it hopes to rein in political discontent and regain competitiveness,

In Philippine The Asian Development Bank (ADB) will fund an energy-efficiency project in the Philippines that will give away 13 million energy-saving lights to homeowners and businesses as part of a government push to cut the nation's power bills.

At social Front Singapore's unemployment rate in the last quarter of 2008 rose to a seasonally adjusted 2.6 per cent, up from 2.2 per cent.

And many other things are going on at the same front in this region.

Summary of news items is as below:

• Indonesia

Political Front

- **Indonesian president inaugurates 15 ambassadors**

Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono inaugurated 15 ambassadors on Friday here in a ceremony at the state palace, the Indonesian Foreign Affairs Ministry's spokeman Teuku Faizasyah told Xinhua by phone on Friday.

- **Indonesian 'ulamas' hopeful about Obama**

Given his experience living in Indonesia, newly installed US President Barack Obama could bridge the gap between Muslims and Christians, two religious leaders said Thursday.

Strategic Front

Economic Front

- **Indonesia signs 102-mln-USD package contract on infrastructure**

The Indonesian Public Work Ministry signed on Thursday 214 package contracts worth 1.02 trillion rupiahs (102 million U.S. dollars) for bridge and road construction spreading through 13 provinces.

- **Japan to give Indonesia $2.1 mln loan for energy co-op**

Japan will grant the Indonesian government a loan of 21 million U.S. dollars to improve their bilateral cooperation in the energy sector and to sustain Indonesia's liquid natural gas (LNG) export to Japan.

- **Indonesia's BNI Aims to Sell $50 Million Sukuk in Malaysia**

Indonesia's fourth-largest lender, PT Bank Negara Indonesia Tbk, aims to sell $50 million of Islamic bonds in Malaysia this year, the president director said on Friday.

- **Indon retail Islamic bonds**

THE retail Islamic bonds offered by the Indonesian government for the first time were on sale on Friday in Indonesia, the world's biggest Muslim country.

- **Indonesia to subsidize public housing with 2.5 trillion rupiahs**

The Indonesian government plans tosubsidize the development of public housing across the country with 2.5 trillion rupiahs (about 222.9 million U.S. dollars) in the 2009 fiscal year, said Indonesian Public Housing Minister Mohammad Yusuf Asy`ri on Saturday

- **Four face charges in Indonesia central bank graft case**

A former Indonesian central banker, whose daughter is married to President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s eldest son, was charged with graft yesterday over a scandal that involves illegal payments to members of parliament.

- **Indonesia's silent voters being heard**

When President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono became Indonesia's first directly elected democratic leader in 2004, the former soldier was catapulted to power despite the fact his Democratic Party had won a mere 7.5% of the vote in previous legislative elections.

- **Minister: Indonesia secures $6 bln standby loans**

Indonesia has got commitment from foreign creditors of up to 6 billon U.S. dollars standby loans if it fails to get sufficient funds from bond markets to plug the budget deficit targeted of 2.5 percent of the GDP, Finance Minister Sri Mulyani said Monday.

- **Present global crisis won't affect growing relations between RI and India**

The rapid growth of economic ties between India and Indonesia will not be significantly affected by the present global financial crisis, the Indian Ambassador to Indonesia Biren Nanda says.

Social Front

- **Indonesia: Muhammadiyah ready to help Rohingyas**

Muhammadiyah is urging Jakarta to take a "wise" approach when dealing with Muslim refugees from Myanmar, saying Indonesia's second largest Islamic organization is ready to help them if the government fails to do so.

- **`Fatwa on abstention won't affect voters'**

The recent fatwa against voter abstention issued by the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) would not affect voter behavior, a senior political researcher said Monday. "The effect will be insignificant," said Syamsuddin Haris of the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI).
of the Indonesian Ulema Council rulings accord us little hope this will happen.

- **Indonesia to Repatriate Burmese Migrants**

Indonesia says it will deport 193 Burmese minority Rohingya boat people because they are economic and not political migrants.

- **Kin of Indonesian president in corruption trial**

The Corruption Court is scheduled to begin the corruption trial of Aulia Pohan, father-in law to Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's son, and three other former Bank Indonesia (BI) governors in Jakarta on Friday morning.

- **Indonesia Prosecutors Want Life For Bank's Ex-Official**

Indonesian prosecutors Friday requested life in prison for a relative of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono who is accused of embezzling millions of dollars from the country's central bank.

• Malaysia

Political Front

- **Look East Policy Enhanced Japan-Msia's Relation, Says Ambassador**

The Look East Policy has enhanced bilateral relations between Japan and Malaysia, the Japanese Ambassador to Malaysia Masahiko Horie said.

He also stated that the Look East Policy was a cornerstone of Japan-Malaysia bilateral relations

- **Malaysia ruling coalition claims state power grab**

Malaysia's ruling coalition claimed it wrested control of a key state from the opposition Wednesday after three lawmakers deserted the alliance that ruled the state.

But the opposition alliance demanded new elections for the northern Perak state legislature, saying it had decided to dissolve the 59-member assembly before the defections.

- **Malaysian DPM confirms Perak defections, BN to form new state government**

Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian coalition Barisan Nasional (BN) has regained control of Perak state after three Parti Keadilan Rakyat and a DAP state assembly members declared that they have quit their parties, Deputy Prime Minister Najib Tun Abdul Razak announced on Wednesday.

- **Don't be picky about jobs: Abdullah**

Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (R) during the launching of the Rural Action Plan at Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Air Kuning, Jan 29. Abdullah on Thursday called on unemployed Malaysians not to be too choosy when picking jobs especially during the current uncertain economic conditions. Bernama

- **Only 41% think Najib will be good PM: Survey**

The approval rating of Malaysia's incoming prime minister, Datuk Seri Najib Razak, continues to fall, amid increasing unhappiness among Malaysians over the government's handling of important issues in recent months..

Strategic Front

Economic Front

- **-Malaysian govt turns down AirAsia airport**

Malaysia's government has turned down plans from budget carrier AirAsia to build a new airport outside the capital Kuala Lumpur, a source with knowledge of the negotiations said on Friday.

- **Malaysia to build 25,000 low-cost houses**

The Malaysian government will build at least 25,000 low-cost houses nationwide this year through the economic stimulus package launched by the government recently.

- **Malaysia's second astronaut's mission extended**

The Malaysian Science, Technology and Innovations Ministry has extended its contract with the country's second astronaut Faiz Khaleed for two years, local media reported on Saturday. Faiz had accepted the offer, which means he would stand by as the country's candidate astronaut until 2011 to see if there is any opportunity to enter space.

- **Japan Scraps Most Duties On Malaysian Products**

Japan scrapped duties on 88% of products traded with Malaysia, effective Sunday, Malaysia's government announced.

- **Next Malaysian PM uses blog to form economic policy**

E-government is a popular buzzword but I'm never convinced that launching an official "blog" - which is invariably written by some unimaginative spin doctor - and a YouTube channel necessarily represents a genuine commitment to listen to the people. Usually it's just another vehicle for spin, with suspect comments removed by lackeys on the quiet, unless bloggers pick up on the interference.

Fortuitously, Malaysia's next PM (and current finance minister) Najib Razak has presented us with a great opportunity to test the real value of such e-government exercises.

- **Raise fuel subsidy for transport operators**

WHILE the Malaysian Government is planning its second economic stimulus package, it should consider ways to increase the spending power of consumers in the low-income group.Many countries in the region are giving coupon vouchers as cash assistance to consumers.

- **Malaysia budget deficit may top 5pc this year**

THE budget deficit this year is likely to exceed five per cent due to increased government spending, resulting from pump priming, to spur the economy.

- **Top Malaysia banker wants review of race policy**

Malaysia must review its race-based economic policies if it hopes to rein in political discontent and regain competitiveness, according to a top banker who is the brother of the country's incoming premier.

- **CIMB Nazir's five points to counter economic slump**

Datuk Seri Nazir Tun Razak, the CIMB group chief executive, said the Malaysian government should go beyond "orthodox" fiscal stimulus and monetary measures to boost the economy that faces its biggest challenge in years.Finance Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said recently the whole amount of RM7bil allocated under the first stimulus package would be fully disbursed by the end of last month.

. **Social Front**

• Philippine

Political Front

- **Lessons from Obama campaign for RP presidential bets**

Memo to Jejomar "Jorack Obama" Binay: You can't hope to replicate Barack Obama's successful campaign for the 2010 Philippine elections so don't even try.

Strategic Front

Economic Front

- **ADB to Help Philippines Save $100 Million Yearly Fuel Cost by Using Energy-Efficient Lights**

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) will fund an energy-efficiency project in the Philippines that will give away 13 million energy-saving lights to homeowners and businesses as part of a government push to cut the nation's power bills.

- **Philippines to help Brunei to develop agricultural sector**

The Philippines is expected to help Brunei to develop its agricultural sector, according to Brunei newspapers on Saturday.

- **Brunei to export IT products to Philippines**

Brunei has signed deals with the Philipines to export information and communications technology products (ICT) to its Southeast Asian neighbor, according to reports reaching here on Saturday.

Social Front

- **Brunei to send more peacekeepers to S Philippines (pol,eco)**

Brunei will increase its contingent of peacekeepers in the International Monitoring Team (IMT) that currently oversees the peace process in Mindanao, the Philippines, according to reports reaching here on Saturday.

- **Muslim rebels turn to extortion: military**

Muslim separatist guerrillas in Mindanao are attacking rural businesses as part of extortion schemes, the military charged on Saturday.

- **Arroyo to Discuss Rights, More Job Opportunities for Filipinos in Bahrain**

President of Philippines Maria Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo is scheduled to arrive in Bahrain today as part of plan to push for more job opportunities and labour rights for its citizens in Bahrain.

- **More Filipinos expecting better life in 2009, reports SWS**

More Filipinos are optimistic about their lives getting better this year compared to those who expect it to become worse, a survey by the Social Weather Stations (SWS) found out. The survey results revealed that 30 percent of adult Filipinos expect their personal quality of life to improve in the next 12 months, while 15 percent expect it to get worse.

- **800,000 jobless Filipinos?**

SOME 800,000 Filipinos are in danger of losing their jobs this year as the global economic slowdown hits the export sector, Economic Planning Secretary Ralph Recto said on Monday.

- **Ebola virus hits more pig farmers in the Philippines**

Four more workers at pig farms in the Philippines have contracted the Ebola-Reston subtype of Ebola virus, in addition to a case reported two weeks ago.

- **ANC Mindanao forum: Expert group proposed for RP-MILF talks**

An expert group that is associated neither with the government nor the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) should be formed immediately to lay the groundwork for the resumption of the peace talks between both sides.

- **Navy officer says Basilan situation getting worse**

One of the top Philippine Navy officers in the region has admitted Wednesday that the situation in Basilan province is getting worse following the abduction of two employees of a microfinance firm in Sumisip town Tuesday night.

- **Philippines government concerned over Mindanao kidnappings**

The Philippine government has expressed alarm over the rising incidence of kidnapping in southern Mindanao.

- **Philippine military poised to rescue hostages**

It appears the military option will be used to rescue the three kidnapped aid workers of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)..

- **West Papua Camp Demolitioned By Indonesia Police**

West Papua Emergency Camp Demolitioned By Indonesia Police & Government.Sentani, [kabarpapua.com] - Indonesia Police and the government of Jayapura Regent break down West Papuan Emergency Camp. West Papua emergency camp is bild besides Theys H. Eluay.

- **Indonesian president calls on Chinese ethnic to make efforts for country's development**

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• Thailand

Political Front

- **Pressures mount on new Thai PM**

Abhisit Vejjajiva took office as Thailand's prime minister last month promising political reconciliation and economic revival, but his honeymoon has been short.

- **Thai neighbours silent on Rohingyas:**

Thailand's Muslim-majority neighbours Indonesia and Malaysia have been conspicuously quiet over Bangkok's alleged inhumane treatment of Rohingya Muslims fleeing Burma, *write John Aglionby and John Burton*.

● Thailand's divisions have dominated its politics for the past three years.

On the streets, the division appears as a conflict between the red-shirted supporters of Thaksin Shinawatra, the former premier who welded the country's rural poor into a potent politial force, and the yellow-shirted supporters of the People's Alliance for Democracy, which draws its support from the country's middle classes, supported by elements in the army, monarchists and big business.

Strategic Front

Economic Front

- **Thailand parliament approves economic stimulus package**

Early yesterday passed a US$3.35 billion stimulus package aimed at boosting the flagging economy after months of street protests and last year's crippling airport seizures.

- **Thailand looks to scrap visa fees to boost tourism**

Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva said his government may waive visa fees for all tourists for three months in a bid to boost visitor numbers following last year's siege of Bangkok's airports.

- **Tourism groups forecast 14 million**

Despite challenging economic conditions, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), together with related state agencies and private-sector organisations, jointly issued a forecast yesterday of 14 million foreign visitors generating about 505 billion baht for Thailand in 2009.

- **Economist magazine blocked in Thailand again**

The Economist's distributors in Thailand are refusing to circulate the current affairs magazine for a second week running because of an article critical of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and the army.

- **Thai gov't suspends foreign workers' registration**

Thailand's government had decided to postpone a registration of thousands of foreign workers in a move to keep jobs open for Thais as the economic slump was looming.

The Thai Labor Ministry under the previous government planned to register about 800,000 foreign workers to ease the shortage of unskilled labor in 10 sectors, including fisheries, farming and construction.

- **Thai army officer: soldiers not assigned to blend in with protesters during Saturday mass rally**

Soldiers were not assigned to blend in with protesters during Saturday's planned mass rally by the anti-government -- Democratic Alliance Against Dictatorship's (DAAD), the website by Bangkok Post reported Friday.

Social Front

- **Thai Deputy PM: Police would take action if anti-gov't protesters break laws**

Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban said here Friday that police would take action if the anti-government protesters who planned to stage a mass rally at the Government House on Saturday break laws.

- **UNHCR wants transparent investigation**

Bangkok: The United Nations yesterday called on the Thai government for a "transparent" investigation into reports that the navy last month took an estimated 1,000 Rohingya refugees out to sea and set them adrift in boats without engines or supplies. "We feel very strongly that this needs to be the subject of a transparent investigation," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) regional representative Raymond Hall said.

- **Junta denies Rohingya boat people are from Burma**

Burma's junta has denied the Rohingya boat people washing up in Thailand, India and Indonesia are from its soil.

- **Thousands of Thai police to be deployed at pro-Thaksin rally**

More than 5,000 police are to be deployed in the Thai capital on Saturday as supporters of ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra hold a massive anti-government protest, police said on Friday.

• Singapore

Political Front

- **S'pore, Indonesia working out details of border agreement signing ceremony**

Singapore is pleased that it has been able to resolve its long-standing maritime border dispute with Indonesia. A brief statement from Singapore's Foreign Affairs Ministry says details of the signing ceremony are being worked out.

Strategic Front

- **Singapore to mark 25 years of total defence on Feb 15**

Singapore will commemorate 25 years of total defence with a series of activities on February 15. Called "TD25", the event will be held at the Suntec City Tropics Atrium.

Economic Front

- **Budget meant to have multiplier effect on whole economy**

The S$20.5 billion Resilience Package is the right budget for the times. The aim is to give broad-based help, yet be simple enough to be rolled out quickly this year. Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam said this in response to parliamentary queries raised during the three days of debate on the Budget Statement.

- **Singapore shares close 0.39% higher**

- Singapore shares closed 0.39 per cent higher on Tuesday in sluggish trade, dealers said. The blue-chip Straits Times Index rose 6.63 points to 1,711.92 on a volume of 649 million shares worth S$630 million. Losers beat gainers 193 to 145, with 905 issues unchanged.

- **Economic downturn presents opportunities for entrepreneurs**

A number of Singaporeans have lost their jobs as a result of the recent global financial turmoil. Many are hunting for stable employment in the current period of uncertainty.

- **Singapore firms in strong position to survive crisis**

Singapore companies could not have been in better shape when they entered the current economic downturn. According to data from DP Information Group, Singapore's companies were at their peak when the crisis hit in the second half of 2008, with net profit and revenues at five-year highs.

- **S'pore partners WEF and others to form Global Cooperation System**

Singapore has joined Qatar and Switzerland in partnering the World Economic Forum (WEF) in its initiative to establish a Global Cooperation System (GCS).

- **PM Lee urges S'poreans to be confident about future despite downturn**

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on Sunday called on Singaporeans to be confident about the country's future despite the current downturn. It comes just before the country's Parliament debates this year's record S$20.5 billion budget announced recently to help tide over the crisis.

- **Singapore must be disciplined about reserves: SM Goh**

Singapore's Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong has said the country must be disciplined and not dip into the reserves at the first sign of trouble.

- **Slight increase in road fatalities in 2008, motorcyclists remain most vulnerable**

Road fatalities saw a slight increase last year - 222 compared to 214 the year before.

The Traffic Police said its latest findings still indicate motorcyclists and pillion riders remain the most vulnerable group. There are nearly 875,000 vehicles on Singapore's roads these days - up 6 per cent from 2007.

- **Saving jobs will have bigger impact in boosting Singapore economy**

Putting cash directly into the hands of consumers to stimulate spending is not the best way to help Singapore's economy during the downturn.

- **Singapore's employment growth slows, jobless rate up at 2.6% in Q4**

Singapore’s unemployment rate in the last quarter of 2008 rose to a seasonally adjusted 2.6 per cent, up from 2.2 per cent in the third quarter on rising retrenchments with slowing employment growth and a weaker economy.

- **EDB's survey shows poor business sentiment in manufacturing and services sectors**

Two separate government surveys have confirmed that businesses in the manufacturing and services sectors have become more pessimistic.

Social Front

- **Online network set up to share flu pandemic info with doctors**

The SingHealth cluster of public healthcare institutions in Singapore has established an online network to act as a one-stop information resource on flu pandemics.

Vietnam

Political Front

- **Obama's 'Vietnam' strategy**

You aren't really the U.S. president until you've ordered an air-strike on somebody, so Barack Obama is certainly president now: two in his first week in office. But now that he has been blooded, can we talk a little about this expanded war he's planning to fight in Afghanistan?

- **Gov't orders smooth implementation of ASEAN charter**

The Prime Minister has appointed the Foreign Ministry as the national coordinator for regional cooperation in the process of building an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) community and executing the ASEAN charter.

Strategic Front

Economic Front

- **Vietnam PM says no need to devalue dong**

There is no need to devalue the Vietnamese dong currency because there are enough dollars in the banking system and it would have an adverse impact on foreign debt, a newspaper quoted Primed Minister Nguyen Tan Dung as saying. 'If the domestic currency is devalued, making the exchange rate which now stands at a little over 17,000 dong per dollar rise to 18,000 per dollar it will be hard to predict how much Vietnam's current foreign debt of $18 billion will be, and how that will affect the budget balance,' the online version of the Saigon Times (www.thesaigontimes.vn) quoted Dung as saying.

- **Vietnam PM forecasts economy to recover by May**

Vietnam's PM Nguyen Tan Dung is optimistic about the future of the country's economy. [ABC]Vietnam's economy will pick up within the next three months, despite the impact of the global economic crisis, says Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung.

- **Gov't reduces petrol import taxes by 10 percent**

The Government has cut preferential tax rates on imported petroleum to 25 percent from 35 percent. The new rate will be applied to imported petrol from Feb. 10.

- **Analyst sees declining oil production in Vietnam**

Analyst BMI has forecast a 3% reduction in Vietnamese oil production during 2007-18,

- **Vietnam stock market hits three-year low**

Vietnam's stock market Thursday fell to its lowest level since December 2005, after state media reported that ongoing losses had driven several securities firms to the verge of bankruptcy. The VN-Index ended the day down 2.9 per cent, or 8.3 points, to close at 277.8, the lowest level since December 29, 2005.

Social Front

- **China to provide free aid to DPRK**

The government of China has recently decided to offer free aid to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), according to the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA).

• Laos

Political Front

Economic Front

- **Consultation meeting to address financial crisis in tourism sector held**

A consultation meeting to find ways and measures for improving the services and to attract more tourists to Laos was held on 4 February in Vientiane. The function was chaired by Mr. Soukaseum Bodhisane, Vice Chairman of the Lao National Tourism Administration (LNTA) and was attended by representatives of tour agents, hotels and guesthouses in Vientiane.

Social Front

- **Enhancing the capacity of the Lao PDR to participate in the international legal system**

On 5 February 2009 H.E. Mr. Phongsavath Boupha, Vice Minister Ministry of Foreign Affairs, together with Ms. Sonam Yangchen Rana, UN Resident Coordinator / UNDP Resident Representative, signed a Project Document for the International Law Project Phase III.

• Cambodia

Political Front

Strategic Front

- **Border talks deadlock, again**

CAMBODIAN and Thai negotiators have again failed to reach an agreement to end a long-running dispute over their shared border, but say new talks will be held in mid-April.

Economic Front

- **Exports offered $1.6m boost**

A US$1.6 million World Bank-funded export promotion program launched Tuesday, offering $30,000 grants to companies looking to tap the international market. The Export Market Access Fund (EMAF) runs for 16 months and is aimed at increasing the value and variety of local exports, say organisers.

- **PM lashes out at developed world, donors over crisis**

- HUN SEN lambasted Western countries Thursday for the economic crisis, blaming them for corruption and mismanagement at an economic conference in Phnom Penh.

PM presses for 6pc growth

THE government is committed to six percent growth in 2009, despite the economic crisis, Prime Minister Hun Sen said Thursday.

Social Front

Environmental Front

- **Govt denies mismanaging resources**

CORRUPT ruling elites have monopolised Cambodia's emerging oil and mineral sectors, aided by a "total lack" of transparency and a supine foreign donor community, according to a new report from corruption watchdog Global Witness.

- **Migrant worker jobs hit by regional unemployment**

GOVERNMENT and non-state bodies estimate that Cambodian migrant workers will find it increasingly difficult to find employment in the region as demand for overseas workers drops.

Detailed Monitoring Report

• Indonesia

Political Front

- **Indonesian president inaugurates 15 ambassadors**

Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono inaugurated 15 ambassadors on Friday here in a ceremony at the state palace, the Indonesian Foreign Affairs Ministry's spokeman Teuku Faizasyah told Xinhua by phone on Friday.

The 15 ambassadors included Indonesia's new permanent representative to the United Nations in Geneva, Dian Triansyah Djani. According to the national Antara news agency, the other ambassadors are Ahmad Rusdi to Greece; Eddy Pratomo to Germany; Eddy Setiabudhi to East Timor; Harsha Edwana Joesoef to Slovakia; Yudhistiranto Sungadi to Tanzania; I Gede Ngurah Swajaya to Cambodia; Ishak Latuconsina to Pakistan; Mohamad Oemar to Italy, Cyprus, FAO, IFAD, and WFP; Muhammad Ibnu Said to Tunisia; Nicholas Tandi Dammen to South Korea; Nining Suningsih Rochadiat to Ukraine, Georgia, and Armenia; Primo Alui Joelinato to Australia; Zainulbahar Noor to Jordan and Palestine; and Zet Mirzal Zainuddin to Bangladesh and Nepal

- **Indonesian 'ulamas' hopeful about Obama**

Given his experience living in Indonesia, newly installed US President Barack Obama could bridge the gap between Muslims and Christians, two religious leaders said Thursday.

He and Dr. Endang Turmudi, secretary general of the Central Board of Nahdlatul Ulama, talked to The Manila Times in an exclusive roundtable interview on Thursday. They were in Manila to attend an ulama forum organized by the Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy (PCID), headed by Amina Rasul.

An ulama is a Muslim scholar. Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama are religious organization, among the many that exist in Indonesia. They differ in the branch of Islam that they teach. Abbas said that living in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim majority nation in the world, has embedded Islam in Obama's subconscious. He explained that this "understanding" would be important, as 80 percent of decisions made during a crisis are derived from the subconscious.

Turmudi agreed, saying Obama made many Muslim friends while he was living in Indonesia. Obama spent his childhood in Jakarta in late 1960's when his mother, Ann Durham, was married to an Indonesian. Turmudi said he does not expect the new US president to defend Islam, but that he would uphold justice. In an interview with the Al-Arabiya satellite television network on Monday, Obama said, "My job to the Muslim world is to communicate that the Americans are not your enemy. We sometimes make mistakes. We have not been perfect."

Acting responsibly

Despite Indonesians' optimism, Abbas said the US should act responsibly. He explained that many of the extremists terrorizing the world were products of America's policy during the Cold War, such the Talibans who the Soviet Army with support from Washington.

The ulamas explained that not many people understand that there are five different images of Islam, each its own distinct character—Southeast Asia, Middle East, Europe, Iran (formerly Persia) and Turkey (the former seat of the Ottoman Empire). In Indonesia, Abbas said Muslims practice open mindedness and promotes nationalism and good relationship with other religions including the Christians. The Islam practiced in Southeast Asia was spread through trade and commerce, giving Muslims here a softer image compared to how that religion is perceived, in Europe for example, where the religions spread through conquest and crusades. Also in Indonesia, the madrassa or Islamic schools incorporate secular subjects—like math and science—with religious teachings. This is not the case in Islamic schools in other countries. But he and Turmudi admitted that the existence of Muslim fundamentalist is a growing concern. He hoped to

promote the Southeast Asian image Islam, but adding that it is not their practice to force their faith on other people.

Strategic Front

Economic Front

- **Indonesia signs 102-mln-USD package contract on infrastructure**

The Indonesian Public Work Ministry signed on Thursday 214 package contracts worth 1.02 trillion rupiahs (102 million U.S. dollars) for bridge and road construction spreading through 13 provinces.

The budget allocated for bridge and road constructions was lifted in 2009 to 17 trillion rupiahs (1.7 billion U.S. dollars) from 16.8 trillion rupiahs (1.68 billion U.S. dollars) in 2008. But the budget was still not sufficient to cover the total cost of 35,000 kms of roads and 17,000 bridges, said the minister.

- **Japan to give Indonesia $2.1 mln loan for energy co-op**

Japan will grant the Indonesian government a loan of 21 million U.S. dollars to improve their bilateral cooperation in the energy sector and to sustain Indonesia's liquid natural gas (LNG) export to Japan. "Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) and Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) expect a good cooperation in the energy sector by providing the loans. Besides, to strengthen bilateral relationship between the two countries, JBIC demands Indonesia to increase gas export to Japan," the Indonesian Business daily on Friday quoted an unnamed source as saying. According to the source who knew the agenda of the meeting between JBIC President and CEO Hiroshi Watanabe and Indonesian Vice President Jusuf Kalla, the two also discussed respective economic prospects in 2009. Indonesia was the largest gas supplier to Japan in 2006, with an export volume of 13.99 million tons.

- **Indonesia's BNI Aims to Sell $50 Million Sukuk in Malaysia**

Indonesia's fourth-largest lender, PT Bank Negara Indonesia Tbk, aims to sell $50 million of Islamic bonds in Malaysia this year, the president director said on Friday.

Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, has lagged behind neighbors Malaysia and Singapore in developing an Islamic market. He did not elaborate on the currency to be used in the issuance.Islamic bonds do not pay interest, which is banned as usury under Islamic law and structured as profit sharing or rental agreements underpinned by physical assets.The government plans to issue its first retail sukuk bond next month to

help develop the Islamic market, which had lagged behind other countries due partly to a weak regulatory framework.

- **Indon retail Islamic bonds**

THE retail Islamic bonds offered by the Indonesian government for the first time were on sale on Friday in Indonesia, the world's biggest Muslim country.

The SR-001 sukuk, which have a yield of 12 per cent, will mature in three years effective from February 25 this year. The government has appointed 13 official agents, which consist of four conventional banks, one shariah bank and eight securities. Finance Minister Sri Mulyani Indrawati said that the government would use the income to finance its widening budget deficit.

Indonesia, which faces declining commodity exports and lower foreign investment amid the global slump, has raised its projected budget deficit to 2.5 per cent of gross domestic product from one percent. Although Muslims form the majority in the country of 234 million people, shariah finance comprises only one to two percent of all finance, Islamic scholar Azyumardi Azra said.

Mr Sukuk conform to Islamic Shariah law in which charging interest is forbidden. They create returns through profit-sharing agreements or from the lease of securitised assets owned by the seller. Indonesia's sukuk use the assets model, known as ijarah, and are backed by government land and buildings. Indonesia's shariah financing market still lags far behind nations like Malaysia in magnitude.

- **Indonesia to subsidize public housing with 2.5 trillion rupiahs**

The Indonesian government plans tosubsidize the development of public housing across the country with 2.5 trillion rupiahs (about 222.9 million U.S. dollars) in the 2009 fiscal year, said Indonesian Public Housing Minister Mohammad Yusuf Asy`ri on Saturday. "The budget is for a subsidy for housing development for the people across Indonesia," the minister said in western Indonesia's Aceh province, adding that the funds would be enough for building 170,000 units of land housing and around 40,000 units of apartment, according to national Antara news agency on Saturday. Another report by the Jakarta Post said that those eligible to get the subsidy should be tax payers with monthly income of no more than 4.5 million rupiahs (about 400 dollars).

- **Four face charges in Indonesia central bank graft case**

A former Indonesian central banker, whose daughter is married to President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's eldest son, was charged with graft yesterday over a scandal that involves illegal payments to members of parliament. Aulia Pohan, 63, was charged along with three other central bankers with corruption which cost the state 100bn rupiah ($8.84m) in losses. "The defendants were fully aware that withdrawals from a central bank foundation were handed over to former central bank deputies to resolve the liquidity fund case and central bank bill amendment," prosecutor Rudi Margono told the Jakarta graft court.

The case centred on a foundation linked to the bank that is alleged to have made payments of about $10m to lawmakers to smooth the passage of a central bank amendment bill and to cover legal assistance for former central bank officials involved in a 1999 liquidity fund case involving the central bank.

If found guilty, the four could face a maximum term of life in jail and a one billion rupiah fine, or a minimum four years' jail. Several high-ranking figures involved in the scandal that have been found guilty include the former Bank Indonesia governor Burhanuddin Abdullah, who was sentenced to five years' jail last year, and lawmakers Hamka Yandhu and Antony Zeidra Abidin who got for three and 4- years respectively. The Bank Indonesia scandal is potentially embarrassing for Yudhoyono, who promised to tackle endemic graft in Southeast Asia's biggest economy when he was elected in 2004.

However, Transparency International Indonesia, which monitors graft, commended Yudhoyono for his hands-off approach over the case but also said he should not exploit it for political gain. Yudhoyono is seeking a second term in office in a direct presidential election in July. Indonesia regularly ranks as one of the most corrupt countries in the world but appears to be making some progress in tackling the problem. Several high-ranking officials have been imprisoned for graft in the past couple of years.

- **Indonesia's silent voters being heard**

When President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono became Indonesia's first directly elected democratic leader in 2004, the former soldier was catapulted to power despite the fact his Democratic Party had won a mere 7.5% of the vote in previous legislative elections.

Now with new legislative and presidential elections scheduled for this year, political analysts are focusing on the potentially pivotal role of the so-called *golput*, registered voters who choose for various reasons to either stay away from the polls or cast blank ballots, which accounted for around 25% of the electorate at the 2004 legislative polls

With relatively peaceful and orderly elections in both 1999 and2004, Indonesia's decade-old transition from authoritarian to democratic rule has been widely lauded as a regional success story. Former strongman Suharto, who throughout his 32-year tenure was officially returned to power in six different elections, tightly controlled the country's electoral process, which he famously referred to as "festivals of democracy".

At that time only three political parties were allowed to participate in the polls, which were consistently won by the military-linked Golkar party; in the first elections of the post-Suharto era, 145 parties registered and 48 parties finally took part in the 1999 polls. In 2004, the legislative polls were contested by 24 political parties in a sprawling democratic process that spanned 14,000 islands, three time zones, and entailed more than 500,000 polling stations.

Less critical attention, however, has been paid to the role of the golput, the huge number of registered voters who choose to not take part in the 2004 legislative polls after nearly 95% of the electorate took part in the 1999 elections. Accounting for over 25% of eligible voters, the golput was the real percentage winner of the 2004 elections, outpacing the top vote-getting Golkar party, which received just 21.6% of the popular vote.

The term "golput", an antithetical spin on the word Golkar, harks to the Suharto-era when voters rebelled against the oppressive, military-backed New Order regime by casting empty ballots or purposefully spoiling their votes. Then the golput figure was smaller, estimated on average at around 10%, as Indonesians feared the consequences of their acts of defiance.

In the democratic era, the golput is much larger and defined loosely as anyone who fails to vote during the election. The reasons for non-participation vary: some can't be bothered to vote; some are overwhelmed by the electoral choices; and, perhaps most crucially, many feel the democratic process has - like its authoritarian forerunner - failed to adequately address the crucial issues of inequality, injustice and corruption that successive elected leaders have promised to tackle.

Analysts say it also demonstrates a rising political maturity among voters who are not willing to simply settle and choose among parties and candidates they feel are out of touch with average voters' needs and aspirations. While more democracy has brought positive changes, including a freer press and greater scrutiny of public affairs, elected leaders have failed to tackle the many systemic and economic problems that directly impact on voters' livelihoods.

Silent protests

With new legislative elections scheduled for this April 9, the golput phenomenon is expected to make its popular absence felt again. Judging by the dismal turnout at recent regional elections, research company Indo Barometer, among others, predict that the golput figure could reach as high as 40%.

For instance, the golput rate at the 2008 Cilacap in Central Java province and neighboring Banyumas regency elections stood respectively at 43% and 45%. Meanwhile, the golput rate at the Central Java gubernatorial election also held last year was estimated at nearly 70%.

Those embarrassingly high rates of non-participation are raising hackles among politicians. Cilacap Regent Probo Yulastoro reportedly promised 23 district chiefs in his regency that each village administration would receive a free motorcycle if they could keep the golput rate at or lower than 5% in their villages during the election.

The Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI), an umbrella organization of major Islamic groups, even issued a fatwa stating that it is "a moral sin" if one does not cast his vote in this year's elections. The MUI is known to support certain Islamic political parties which in past polls have performed poorly.In a public opinion survey of over 5,000 workers from both the government and private sectors spanning 33 Indonesian provinces, only 17.8% respondents said that they would choose not to vote. But the actual golput tally at upcoming elections could be much higher as 76.2% of the respondents in the same poll said that they "are not interested" in following the campaigns of both political parties and presidential candidates.

Analysts and academics have different interpretations of the high non-vote rates. According to Max Lane, a writer, researcher, and political analysts with over 38 years experience in the country, Indonesians are not politically apathetic. "Everyone, everywhere, in Indonesia is talking and enjoys talking about politics," he said.

"If Indonesians don't feel that any of the parties are championing their causes, they have the legal right not to choose," said Evi Arifin, a researcher at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore. By not choosing, she said, the golput has made a clear statement by not supporting any of the proposed parties and candidates.

An increasingly free media has highlighted that national sentiment. The satirical political talk show, Demo Crazy, shown on national television recently referred to the people running for upcoming elections as *itu-itu saja lagi* or "the same old faces running again". Indeed the 2009 presidential poll seems likely to be a rerun of the previous one, with former president Megawati Sukarnoputri and incumbent Yudhoyono widely expected to square off again.

This is despite the fact that neither candidate while in office was able to make a serious dent in endemic economic problems, including persistently high poverty and unemployment rates that are expected to only get worse as the global and financial economic crisis impacts on the country's crucial manufacturing and export sectors.

Meanwhile, organized groups of laborers and farmers are still not adequately represented in government. That, analysts say, explains the high frequency of street demonstrations mounted against Yudhoyono's government. "[General elections] are only for powerful people or people who used to be in power to choose who is going to be in power next. This [election] is just a form of fraud," said Emelia Yanti, the secretary general of United Federation of Independent Labor . After 10 years of democracy, many Indonesians feel that government has failed to bring through new policies for real improvements to their livelihoods. While there are fundamental differences between the Suharto-era golput and its new democratic incarnation, the symptoms of voter frustration with Indonesia's political system are glaringly similar.

In 2004, none of the major political parties garnered enough votes to reach the 25% threshold legally required to nominate their own presidential candidate. That led to complicated coalition building, which effectively catapulted the military-linked Golkar back to the fore in a power-sharing arrangement with Yudhoyono's Democratic Party.

That less-than-ringing electoral mandate has made it difficult for Yudhoyono to pass badly needed economic and other reforms through the legislature. Whether Indonesia can afford another weak administration in the wake of growing global turmoil is an increasingly important electoral question. But if recent elections and opinion polls are any indication

- **Minister: Indonesia secures $6 bln standby loans**

Indonesia has got commitment from foreign creditors of up to 6 billon U.S. dollars standby loans if it fails to get sufficient funds from bond markets to plug the budget deficit targeted of 2.5 percent of the GDP, Finance Minister Sri Mulyani said Monday.

The Indonesian government has issued global conventional and Islamic bonds to tap recovered bonds markets as the U.S. and other developed economies plan to launch stimulus packages to revive investors' appetite on assets in emerging market, including Indonesia.

But, the continuing global recession which triggers uncertainty in the market has drawn concern of the failure to tap the markets. Mulyani also said that the domestic economy is still facing uncertainty amid the global economic recession. The Indonesian

government has decided to build massive infrastructure projects to address unemployment and spur growth. For that goal, the government has proposed an economic stimulus package worth 71.3 trillion rupiah (6.32 billion U.S. dollars). Indonesia has said it was seeking standby loans from Australia, the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank in order to secure funding for a projected 132 trillion rupiah (11.38 billion U.S. dollars) budget deficit this year.

- **Present global crisis won't affect growing relations between RI and India**

The rapid growth of economic ties between India and Indonesia will not be significantly affected by the present global financial crisis, the Indian Ambassador to Indonesia Biren Nanda says.

In 2007 India was Indonesia's seventh largest export partner, with a trade balance heavily favoring Indonesia for its main exports of crude palm oil, coal, rubber, and other commodities.

The Ambassador said bilateral trade had been growing between 20 to 30 percent a year since 2003 and Indian investments in Indonesia were also growing at a rapid rate. With figures showing that trade with India reached $7.76 billion by September 2008, a 75 percent jump from $4.43 billion in 2007 during the same period, it is clear trade with the subcontinent is on the rise. The year 2003 only saw $2.40 billion worth of trade take place. President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono announced a new strategic partnership with India during a visit in 2005, setting a trade target of $10 billion by 2010.

Nanda said the fact global markets were down at the moment was largely irrelevant for investors. Large Indian companies have invested huge amounts of money into the automobile, coal, steel, textiles and banking sectors in recent years.

India has already completed negotiations on a free trade agreement (FTA) with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries and will formally sign it at the ASEAN summit meeting in Thailand at the end of this month.

Nanda said the two countries share a centuries-old relationship. In the modern times also this continued. Indonesia's first President, Sukarno, was the chief guest in India when the nation became a republic and swore in its new constitution on Jan. 26, 1950. India celebrated the 59th anniversary of its Republic last Monday, which was attended by Indonesian Vice President Jusuf Kalla and the Speaker of the House of Representatives Agung Laksono.

The Ambassador said this year India is planning to organize a large trade fair to enhance the existing economic links. India will also organize a Indian-themed cultural festival in Indonesia by the end of this year.

Social Front

- **Indonesia: Muhammadiyah ready to help Rohingyas**

Muhammadiyah is urging Jakarta to take a "wise" approach when dealing with Muslim refugees from Myanmar, saying Indonesia's second largest Islamic organization is ready to help them if the government fails to do so.

"Indonesia should deal with them properly. I hope the Rohingya refugees will be looked after until there is an appropriate solution based on humanitarian principles," Muhammadiyah chairman Din Syamsuddin said Sunday.

"If Indonesia will not help, Muhammadiyah is ready to cooperate and assist the refugees with what they need," he said in a text message from New York while attending a World Summit on Peace. Din also asked the Indonesian government to bring this issue to the ASEAN summit in Thailand later this month. Around 175 Rohingyas and 19 Bangladeshis were found in a boat off northern Sumatra on Jan. 7. They are now being kept at a naval base in Sabang, Aceh province.

They are believed to be the only remaining survivors from around 1,000 refugees, largely Rohingyas, who were allegedly abandoned at sea by the Thai military. Thailand denies the allegations.

- **`Fatwa on abstention won't affect voters'**

The recent fatwa against voter abstention issued by the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) would not affect voter behavior, a senior political researcher said Monday. "The effect will be insignificant," said Syamsuddin Haris of the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI).
You fail to mention in the article that according to Ma'ruf Amin of the MUI, "It is forbidden for Muslims to vote for a non-Muslim candidate or leader." That you chose to ignore such obvious sectarianism is disgraceful.

Highlander Of course people will vote for those who are qualified to lead, but unfortunately it is not that simple. People don't vote because they don't know anything about the candidates, so even if they do vote, they simply vote randomly.

Therefore, there is no incentive for them to vote.

Confus How many articles is The Jakarta Post planning to print on the ulema and their fatwas? I'm getting a little ulema- and fatwa-weary, and I'm sure many others feel the same. What a nonsensical organization. Ekyah Surabaya Honestly, I'm more afraid of voting for the wrong candidates - the kind who promise everything but then forget everything once they succeed. Some of these jerks hide behind "religion" to prove that they are holier than other people.

R. Astari The MUI have banned abstention if "qualified candidates exist?" It sounds plausible until you read the fine print. Totally discriminatory and divisive because it makes it illegal for Muslims to vote for non-Muslims, no matter how qualified they might be. It is a further example of the paranoia of an inward-looking forum that is trying to involve itself in politics.

. Sharia is not agreeable to Westerners, yet neither is the corruption and despotism of Indonesia's current judicial system. We ask if Islamic law might posit a viable replacement, only to find it might have in a prouder past, but not at the level to which is has now sunk.

The object of Western missions in Islamic states is to end lawlessness, despotism and fanaticism and to replace it with the rule of law and secular process.

But incidents like these attest that you cannot give the rule of law to a people who do not want it enough to stand up for it themselves. It has only a short period in which to clean up its own corrupt judicial system. If religion is meant to lead the way and set examples on reform issues, then the irrelevance of the Indonesian Ulema Council rulings accord us little hope this will happen.

- **Indonesia to Repatriate Burmese Migrants**

Indonesia says it will deport 193 Burmese minority Rohingya boat people because they are economic and not political migrants.

The boat people are members of Burma's Muslim minority who claim they fled persecution in the mostly Buddhist country.A spokesman for Indonesia's foreign Ministry said Friday that investigators have determined the migrants left their country to seek a better life. He said most of the Rohingyas came from Burma, but that several came from Bangladesh. He did not say when they would be deported.

The Burmese government on Friday claimed the boat people could not be from Burma because there is no recognized Rohingya minority in the country. Despite the denial, authorities said they would deal with the matter.The 193 boat people are believed to be survivors of a group of about 1,000 Burmese asylum-seekers who have been set adrift by the Thai military since December. Indonesian authorities rescued them off their coast in early January and are holding them in a camp in Aceh province.

India is believed to hold some 400 survivors on a remote island.Rights group Amnesty International on Thursday appealed to the governments of Thailand, Indonesia, India, Bangladesh and Burma to abide by international laws on refugees and provide assistance for those in distress at sea. It called on Burma to stop the systematic persecution of the Rohingya minority, which it says is the root cause of the crisis.

- **Kin of Indonesian president in corruption trial**

The Corruption Court is scheduled to begin the corruption trial of Aulia Pohan, father-in law to Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's son, and three other former Bank Indonesia (BI) governors in Jakarta on Friday morning.

Aulia and the three other suspects, Bun Bunan Hutapea, Maman Soemantri and Aslim Tadjuddin, – all former BI deputy governors, would face the judges together and would be tried for the same crime.

The trial will be presided by Judge Mansyurdin Chaniago, who will be assisted by judges Moerdiono, Hendra Yospin, Slamet Subagyo and Anwar. At least 13 lawyers are reported to defend the four suspects.

The four were charged for their alleged involvement in the embezzling of Rp 100 billion (US$8.8 million) from BI's Indonesian Banking Development Foundation (YPPI) in 2003. The money was allegedly misappropriated to smoothen the political settlement of a previous massive loan scandal involving Bank Indonesia liquidity support (BLBI) funds, and also to push through the approval of an amendment to the BI law.The case has brought several BI top names and lawmakers to time service in jail. Former BI governor Burhanuddin Abdullah has been sentenced to five years in prison late last year for his role in dealing out the money, which was neither recorded in the accounts at the BI or YPPI.

Two former top officials of the bank Oey Hoey Tiong and Rusli Simanjuntak were each sentenced to four years jail in October last year in the same case. Lawmakers Hamka Yandhu and Antony Zeidra Abidin were sentenced to three and four-and-a half years in jail respectively last month for receiving bribes from the BI fund.

- **Indonesia Prosecutors Want Life For Bank's Ex-Official**

Indonesian prosecutors Friday requested life in prison for a relative of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono who is accused of embezzling millions of dollars from the country's central bank.

Former Bank Indonesia, or BI, deputy governor Aulia Pohan is accused of using IDR100 billion ($8.7 million) in bank funds to bribe lawmakers and hire lawyers to defend other bank executives facing corruption charges.Prosecutors demanded the maximum life sentence for Pohan and three other deputy BI governors in the first hearing of the case at Indonesia's powerful anti-corruption court.The four men are accused of using IDR31.5 billion of the embezzled money to bribe lawmakers.The remaining IDR68.5 billion was used to hire lawyers to defend other bank officials accused of being complicit in the embezzlement of billions of dollars that went missing during the 1997 to 1998 Asian financial crisis.The reformist Yudhoyono was elected in a landslide in 2004 on promises to tackle entrenched corruption, and he has said he is personally saddened by the allegations against Pohan, the father-in-law of the president's son.

The corruption court last year sentenced former bank governor Burhanuddin Abdullah to five years and gave two other former officials four years in prison each over the case.

• Malaysia

Political Front

- **Look East Policy Enhanced Japan-Msia's Relation, Says Ambassador**

The Look East Policy has enhanced bilateral relations between Japan and Malaysia, the Japanese Ambassador to Malaysia Masahiko Horie said.

He also stated that the Look East Policy was a cornerstone of Japan-Malaysia bilateral relations
Horie said the students mainly attended those universities which had departments of technology.He said that the students concerned had returned to hold important positions in both the government and private sector.He identified these students as those people being in the best position to help cement bilateral relations between Malaysia and Japan. Horie said that since coming to Malaysia more than a year ago,he had met many Malaysians who spoke to him in fluent Japanese.He said the AAJ programme is where all students are taught three subjects in Japanese for a two-year period. According to Horie, under this programme, Japan was not only supporting the instructors but also funding the studies of the Malaysian students in Japan.

He also disclosed that there were many other projects supporting Malaysian students wanting to go and study in Japan.Horie recalled that when the Look East Policy was first initiated, Tun Mahathir had discussed with his then Japanese counterpart, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, the establishment of a Malaysia-Japan International University of Technology here.
He said that Japanese professors from various institutions of higher education including Tokai University and the prestigious Shibaura Institute of Technology in Tokyo, Kyushu University and the Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University would be involved in the Malaysia-Japan International University of Technology.

- **Malaysia ruling coalition claims state power grab**

Malaysia's ruling coalition claimed it wrested control of a key state from the opposition Wednesday after three lawmakers deserted the alliance that ruled the state.

But the opposition alliance demanded new elections for the northern Perak state legislature, saying it had decided to dissolve the 59-member assembly before the defections.

The loss of Perak would roll back inroads the opposition made in general elections last March, when it won control of an unprecedented five of Malaysia's 13 states.

It would also give the ruling National Front coalition a major boost less than two months before Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak assumes the prime ministership in a bid to revive the coalition's flagging support.Najib announced Wednesday that three Perak legislators have quit the opposition and become "friendly independents" aligned with the National Front.Both the National Front and the three-party opposition alliance now have 28 seats in Perak's legislature, but Najib said his coalition effectively has control because However, Perak Chief Minister Mohammad Nizar Jamaluddin said that as far as the opposition is concerned, the state legislature has been dissolved and fresh elections must be held. He has not obtained the state sultan's necessary consent for such a move.

Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim has accused the National Front of trying to bribe opposition lawmakers to defect, but government officials deny it.

- **Malaysian DPM confirms Perak defections, BN to form new state government**

Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian coalition Barisan Nasional (BN) has regained control of Perak state after three Parti Keadilan Rakyat and a DAP state assembly members declared that they have quit their parties, Deputy Prime Minister Najib Tun Abdul Razak announced on Wednesday.

Najib told a news conference that Barisan Nasional in Perak has secured the majority of state seats to form a new Perak government after the two PKR and one DAP assemblymen left their respective parties and became independents "friendly" to the BN.

A fourth assemblyman - Nasarudin Hashim of Bota - left PKR to rejoin UMNO.Najib told a packed press conference at his office in Putrajaya that he will seek an audience with the Sultan of Perak soon to formalise the new state government.

The latest development means the BN coalition could now have a slim majority in the Malaysian parliament, with 31 seats against the opposition's 28.

The loss deals a blow to the Pakatan Rakyat opposition alliance's ambitions of unseating the coalition government after it scooped its best results in history in elections last year. As several of its legislators prepared to defect, the alliance attempted to dissolve the state parliament and trigger fresh elections that pundits said it had a good chance of winning. Anwar's opposition seized control of five states and a third of national parliamentary seats in general elections a year ago, transforming Malaysia's political landscape. Since then the alliance has won two parliamentary by-elections, in a major psychological boost to its ambitions of seizing power. The alliance had held 32 seats in the 59-seat Perak state assembly, with Barisan Nasional holding 27, but the defections leave both sides with 28, and three independents who Najib said will support the BN.

- **Don't be picky about jobs: Abdullah**

Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (R) during the launching of the Rural Action Plan at Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Air Kuning, Jan 29. Abdullah on Thursday called on unemployed Malaysians not to be too choosy when picking jobs especially during the current uncertain economic conditions. Bernama

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has called on unemployed Malaysians not to be too choosy when picking jobs especially during the current uncertain economic conditions.

He said they should instead take employment opportunities that came their way, including jobs currently carried out by foreign workers.Also present were Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi and Chief Secretary to the Government Tan Sri Mohd Sidek Hassan.

Abdullah also hoped that the manufacturing sector would no longer employ foreigners.or an act of injustice when we give priority to our own people," he said.He also called on the related government agencies to facilitate the issuance of licences and permits to unemployed individuals who wanted to venture into business.Malaysians, he said, should also give priority to buying local products because doing so would ensure that the manufacturers would remain in operation.

- **Only 41% think Najib will be good PM: Survey**

The approval rating of Malaysia's incoming prime minister, Datuk Seri Najib Razak, continues to fall, amid increasing unhappiness among Malaysians over the government's handling of important issues in recent months. Just 41 per cent believe current Deputy Prime Minister Najib will be a good PM, a survey of 1,018 Malaysian voters by independent pollster Merdeka Centre late last month showed. Current Premier Abdullah Badawi fared marginally better - 46 per cent of respondents said they were happy with his performance as PM.

Their main beef was the way the government has been handling issues such as racial inequality, racial relations, corruption, the economy and inflation. Such issues, the survey found, topped the list of concerns voters had when it came to assessing the government's performance. Some 43 per cent of voters said the economy was the most pressing issue facing the country, while 17 per cent were most worried about ethnic-related concerns, and 10 per cent about governance and corruption.

The dismal approval ratings, which were released by the centre yesterday, are a far cry from the popularity that both leaders enjoyed when Datuk Seri Abdullah took over as PM in 2003. Then, around 80 per cent of respondents gave the two men the thumbs-up.

Negative perceptions about Mr Najib appeared to be especially strong among non-Malay voters. Only 18 per cent of Chinese and 28 per cent of Indians said he would make a good PM.

On the other hand, Malay voters, who form the majority in Malaysia, gave him a higher rating: 57 per cent of them said he would make a good PM. 'They expect him to turn things around for Umno,' said Mr Ibrahim Suffian, who runs Merdeka Centre.

Strategic Front

Economic Front

- **-Malaysian govt turns down AirAsia airport**

Malaysia's government has turned down plans from budget carrier AirAsia to build a new airport outside the capital Kuala Lumpur, a source with knowledge of the negotiations said on Friday.

The new airport, which would have been the fourth around the capital, attracted criticism from people including influential ex-premier Mahathir Mohamad as well as state investment fund Khazanah, which owns part of Malaysia's airport operator.The decision to cancel the 1.6 billion Malaysian ringgit ($443.7 million) project was taken at a meeting of AirAsia Chief Executive Officer Tony Fernandez and Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak on Friday, the source said.

AirAsia's proposal to build its own dedicated airport follows the budget carrier's longstanding complaint that its low-cost carrier terminal at Kuala Lumpur International Airport would not be able to cope with future passenger growth.
The carrier has also complained about the fees imposed by airport operator Malaysia Airports Holdings. The source said AirAsia would be allowed to renegotiate fees and other charges with MAHB as a result of its request for the new airport being cancelled.

- **Malaysia to build 25,000 low-cost houses**

The Malaysian government will build at least 25,000 low-cost houses nationwide this year through the economic stimulus package launched by the government recently.

Malaysian Housing and Local Government Minister Ong Ka Chuan said his ministry had received an allocation of 1.2 billion RM (about 334 million USD) under the package to stimulate the construction industry amid the economic downturn, Bernama news agency reported on Jan. 29. Housing developers must now change their direction by building more low-cost units as this will not only stimulate the sluggish economy, but such houses are also very saleable, the minister said. From the studies carried out and from the experience of the past economic crisis, the ministry was confident that the stimulus package could assist the country's housing industry, the official added.

- **Malaysia's second astronaut's mission extended**

The Malaysian Science, Technology and Innovations Ministry has extended its contract with the country's second astronaut Faiz Khaleed for two years, local media reported on Saturday. Faiz had accepted the offer, which means he would stand by as the country's candidate astronaut until 2011 to see if there is any opportunity to enter space.

Faiz said that he was ready to undergo the rigorous astronaut training if the government decided to restart its space program that it had momentarily stopped. The injuries to his arm were fully healed and doctors had given the all-clear for him to pursue all types of activities, he told reporters on Saturday.

Faiz was reportedly injured when robbers armed with machetes attacked him and a friend in front of his house near here in November 2007. He reportedly suffered a 5cm long gash on his left arm that almost reached his bone and needed more than 100 stitches for the eight injured tendons controlling his fingers. Malaysia's first astronaut Sheikh Muszaphar Shukor went into space aboard a Russian spaceship in October 2007. In November that year, Sheikh Muszaphar reportedly once requested his two-year contract with the government be shortened, not because he had lost interest in the space program but to get married.

- **Japan Scraps Most Duties On Malaysian Products**

Japan scrapped duties on 88% of products traded with Malaysia, effective Sunday, Malaysia's government announced.

The trade ministry said duties on a further 4% of traded products would be removed within the next five to 10 years while duties on the remaining products would be reduced over 10 years.Japan is one of Malaysia's most important trading partners, accounting for 10.9% of Malaysia's total international trade in 2007.

- **Next Malaysian PM uses blog to form economic policy**

E-government is a popular buzzword but I'm never convinced that launching an official "blog" - which is invariably written by some unimaginative spin doctor - and a YouTube channel necessarily represents a genuine commitment to listen to the people. Usually it's just another vehicle for spin, with suspect comments removed by lackeys on the quiet, unless bloggers pick up on the interference.

Fortuitously, Malaysia's next PM (and current finance minister) Najib Razak has presented us with a great opportunity to test the real value of such e-government exercises.

With the Malaysian government currently working on its second economic stimulus package (like busses, you wait ages for one and then two come along at once), Najib recently appealed for policy suggestions on his blog.

His request, on January 22, elicited 210 responses and Najib, who is widely expected to take over as PM in March, has thanked the responders for their comments and pledged to take their views on board.There were a number of calls to reduce the corruption that many believe is endemic in Malaysian business and many commenters insisted that the policy of economic favouritism for the majority Malay population needs to be thrown out.Whether Najib takes on board any of these suggestions remains to be seen and it will be a test of the real worth of these engagement exercises.

P.S. Among the comments, there are some true comic gems such as Michael's simple request to "ensure members of Parliament do not sleep during working hours" and Yusrizal's plea for Najib to waive a police fine he has received for a dodgy brake light so that his family is not left penniless and starving.

- **Raise fuel subsidy for transport operators**

WHILE the Malaysian Government is planning its second economic stimulus package, it should consider ways to increase the spending power of consumers in the low-income group.Many countries in the region are giving coupon vouchers as cash assistance to consumers.The proposal to increase the public transport fare to address the rising cost of operation must be revised to consider increasing fuel subsidy as a solution at current situation.Malaysia can increase fuel subsidy to public transport operators and slash the fares.This will help the operators burdened with increasing operational cost, as well as provide savings to consumers in the face of rising costs of daily needs and sustain consumer consumption.

Also the mechanism to manage the fuel subsidy is already in existence and the Government only need to allocate the funds required.

The subsidy must be provided together with a timeline for the operators to comply with the service level set by the Committee on the Improvement of Public Transport under the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) in the Prime Minister’s Department over the next three years.This will achieve the three-prong target of priming the economy, providing part of

the social safety net and improving public transport, which may not happen with increased fares.

- **Malaysia budget deficit may top 5pc this year**

THE budget deficit this year is likely to exceed five per cent due to increased government spending, resulting from pump priming, to spur the economy.

The government announced a RM7 billion stimulus package on November 4 last year to face the global economic slowdown and is expected to reveal another worth RM10 billion in April.The official budget deficit estimate for 2009 is 4.8 per cent.

Therefore, tax collected from fuel consumption would likely be re-channelled into more productive sectors such as improving public transport and education as well as boosting construction activities, it added.

- **Top Malaysia banker wants review of race policy**

Malaysia must review its race-based economic policies if it hopes to rein in political discontent and regain competitiveness, according to a top banker who is the brother of the country's incoming premier.

Nazir Razak, the brother of incoming prime minister Najib Razak, said the New Economic Policy (NEP) which favours the majority Malay population, had damaged national cohesion and hindered investment in this Asian country of 27 million people.
"It is timely to examine the NEP, look at how the NEP retards national unity, investments and economic efficiency and develop a new, more relevant framework for economic policy-making," said Nazir, who is chief executive officer of Malaysia's second largest bank CIMB.

The policy gives preferential treatment to Malays who account for around 60 percent of the population in business, education, and home ownership.

It was designed in 1971 after race riots to narrow the wealth gap between the majority Malays and the richer ethnic Chinese.Critics say the NEP has enriched those businessmen who are politically connected and encouraged cronyism and corruption in the coalition that has ruled Malaysia for 51 years.Political analysts said Nazir's comments would carry weight with his brother, but questioned whether Najib, who is currently deputy prime minister and finance minister, would be able to act.

Najib is set to take the helm of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the leading party in the National Front coalition, after party polls in March.
The coalition is still reeling from losses in elections last year when it lost its two-thirds parliamentary majority for the first time in almost 40 years forcing incumbent premier Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to say he would stand down in March.

It recently lost two by-elections to the opposition alliance, led by former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim.

He said the policy could be reviewed so that it was based on income rather than race, a move that has been suggested by Anwar who held government office until he was jailed in the late 1990s.

- **CIMB Nazir's five points to counter economic slump**

Datuk Seri Nazir Tun Razak, the CIMB group chief executive, said the Malaysian government should go beyond "orthodox" fiscal stimulus and monetary measures to boost the economy that faces its biggest challenge in years.Finance Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said recently the whole amount of RM7bil allocated under the first stimulus package would be fully disbursed by the end of last month.

Bank Negara on Jan 21, slashed its benchmark interest rate by 75 basis points to 2.5% to cut borrowing cost.Around the world, governments from Australia to the US have announced trillions of dollars worth of additional spending to counter the global economic slump.Nazir noted that while another spending boost would help, he suggested the government also include key long term strategies to take advantage of the tremendous opportunities.He listed five suggestions;

- Re-examine the New Economic Policy.
- Exploit its social and geographical connectivity to new powerhouses in the region namely the Middle East, China and India.
- Improve collaboration between academia, business and the civil service to develop and execute the national plan.
- Take advantage of acquisition opportunities abroad to fill in the traditional gaps in branding and distribution for Malaysian products and services.
- Attract talents overseas to work in Malaysia, especially in the education sector.

Social Front

• Philippine

Political Front

- **Lessons from Obama campaign for RP presidential bets**

Memo to Jejomar "Jorack Obama" Binay: You can't hope to replicate Barack Obama's successful campaign for the 2010 Philippine elections so don't even try.

According to Jo Hansen, a consultant for the presidential campaign of US President Barack Obama, politicians who want to replicate Obama's success in their own jurisdictions should understand that the preconditions that led to Obama's triumphant campaign are very different and unique for its time.Hansen said the success of the Obama campaign has led many politicians around the world to imitate the message and public image of the 44th president of the United States. For those politicians, Hansen had this to say: "Don't try to look for another Obama. We couldn't find another Obama now even if we tried. So I don't think you ought to try at all."

Hansen said candidates in the 2008 US presidential elections faced many challenges: a nation engaged in two foreign wars, rising unemployment, and the fall of traditional financial infrastructures in America.He also pointed out that the tone of the elections was founded on a genuine yearning for change as antipathy towards outgoing US President George W. Bush continued to spread.Hansen said Obama also faced his own unique challenges that were different from those faced by his opponent. He was African-American, which could be seen by some Americans as a negative. His middle name was Hussein, which fed speculation that he was Muslim. He was up against Sen. Hillary Clinton, who was widely perceived as a frontrunner in the race for the Democratic nomination before the Iowa caucuses.Despite these obstacles, Hansen said Obama continued to gain more supporters as his political campaign became a movement.

The Iowa campaign

Obama's blueprint for what would eventually become a successful grassroots campaign started in Iowa where he scored an upset by winning 38 percent of the Democratic vote, compared to Sen. John Edwards' 30 percent and Clinton's 29 percent.

According to Hansen, winning Iowa was important in setting the tone of the campaign since it was one of several key states that could decide the outcome of the actual election. Because of its importance, the Democratic Party operation ran a well-organized operation that had a strong hierarchy.

Instead of relying on that structure, Hansen said the Obama campaign decided to go to Iowa and upend the old ways of mounting a campaign.Under the leadership of Democratic strategist Paul Tewes, Hansen said the Obama campaign used the existing party political structure to gain grassroots support for their candidate. However, in most

cases, the campaign relied heavily on individuals who were more engaged and enthusiastic about the campaign than the party captains.

"Respect, Empower, Include"

Hansen said the success of the Iowa campaign is reflected not just by Obama's victory but the actual turnout on caucus day. Instead of the usual 90,000 to 110,000 individuals showing up, more than 250,000 people made their voices heard about who they wanted as the Democratic Party's candidate.

Hansen said this spirit of calculated risk-taking was also reflected in the Obama campaign in other key states such as Pennsylvania and Montana. For these two states, he said Democratic strategist John Carson made an experiment: he gave 250 staff members in Pennsylvania a list of names to call every night. The list included very limited information about the individuals and each list was different for each staff member.

In Montana, however, Carson gave 40 staff members the entire list of the names, which included all the details of the individuals being called.In the end, Pennsylvania staff were able to make 45,000 calls every night but the Montana staff almost doubled that with 80,000 calls made.

What made the difference? Hansen said giving the entire list to the Montana staff empowered them to operate in their comfort zones. "There was no difference between the person in Pennsylvania and the one in Montana. What was different was the list. It contained all the details about the people, age, gender, political inclinations. We had all that data and we gave that list to the people in Montana. In Pennsylvania, there was very limited background given about the people being called. The list was very valuable to the organization but we took that risk by giving it away."

He said organizers also put in place checks and balances to ensure that these individuals were doing their jobs well. Most of the time, however, the individual staff and volunteers were given free rein to innovate and step out of their comfort zones to campaign for Obama.

Smart use of technology

Hansen said much has been said and written about the Obama campaign's smart use of existing technology. He said the Obama campaign raised close to a billion dollars in

funding from individual supporters who were encouraged to give as low as $1-$5 (P47-P230) in donations.

He said more than 1,800 Obama videos on websites such as YouTube.com garnered 100 million hits during the campaign. The Obama website also gathered more than 13 million e-mail addresses, which could be used as a political base in the next US presidential election.

Campaign staff also used automatic dialers and VOIP to make hundreds and thousands of calls before election day.

He said at one point, the Obama campaign even bought ads in popular games such as Grand Theft Auto 4 that would encourage people to vote.Hansen said the Internet and other existing technology was freely available to all the other candidates but it was the Obama campaign who put it to good use.

The role of NGOs in the elections

Hansen said nongovernment organizations (NGOs) played a key role in the Obama campaign and contributed largely to his success. He said that in the US, many NGOs exist to influence the political process, which is usually done by being involved in the political campaigns.

"It's a carrot-and-stick situation. NGOs who help candidates to win the elections are proving that they have the constituency to swing the vote. That could influence the elected official when he is in office," he said.

He challenged NGOs in the Philippines to adopt the same approach and force political organizations that have become static to reinvent themselves for progressive political change."NGOs have an incredible role to play in transforming democracy. It is not being on the outside, issuing press releases and saying, 'You ought to do this.' You have to go in the political organizations and using the energy and creativity to change it from within," he said.

He said one challenge facing leaders of NGOs that are involved in political campaigns is how to work in the political organization without losing control of their members. He said this is usually rooted in the fear that the members would abandon the NGO and just work for the political party.

Strategic Front

Economic Front

- **ADB to Help Philippines Save $100 Million Yearly Fuel Cost by Using Energy-Efficient Lights**

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) will fund an energy-efficiency project in the Philippines that will give away 13 million energy-saving lights to homeowners and businesses as part of a government push to cut the nation's power bills. The Project includes savings of about $100 million every year in fuel costs and a deferral of an investment of $450 million in power generation and associated network capacity.

ADB Board of Directors has approved a $31.1 million loan to the Philippines government to establish the project. The Philippine Energy Efficiency Project will distribute the compact fluorescent lamps (CFL) to customers nationwide in exchange for their incandescent bulbs. Each CFL is expected to save customers 400 pesos, around $8.50, each year for the next 7 to 10 years.

The Project will also retrofit government office buildings and public lighting systems with other efficient lighting options and establish an energy service company (ESCO) that will provide financial and technical support to companies planning to reduce energy consumption. ESCO will act as a one-stop-shop for energy efficiency for the public (hospitals, schools and government buildings) and private (industries, hotels, malls) enterprises.

Only 20% of the electricity used by an incandescent bulb produces light, with the remaining 80% wasted as heat. In contrast, a CFL uses all of its electricity input to produce light. While an average incandescent bulb's life is only about 800 hours, the CFLs used in the Project will have a life of 10,000 hours with 2-year warranty.As a result of lower greenhouse gas emissions, the Project will create carbon credits for the Philippines under the Clean Development Mechanism. The success of the Project will encourage private sector participation in energy-efficiency investment.

ADB is extending the loan from its ordinary capital resources to the Philippine government. The loan will have a 25-year repayment period and an interest rate determined in accordance with ADB's LIBOR-based lending facility. The Asian Clean Energy Fund, established by the Government of Japan, will provide a grant of $1.5 million under the Clean Energy Financing Partnership Facility. The government will provide $13.9 million to the Project.

The state-owned Philippine National Oil Co. will establish the energy service company (ESCO) using a $7.5 million loan provided by the Government, and under a subsidiary loan agreement approved by ADB.In the past 30 years, ADB has provided about $2.9 billion in loans and around $15 million in technical assistance to the Philippines power sector.

- **Philippines to help Brunei to develop agricultural sector**

The Philippines is expected to help Brunei to develop its agricultural sector, according to Brunei newspapers on Saturday.

This was one of the outcomes of talks between Brunei Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah and Philippines President Gloria Macapagal Arroyoin Manila on Friday.

Brunei Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah was ending his three-day visit to the Philippines on Saturday, according to the Brunei Times. The Philippines would send a delegation to assist Brunei in its drive to develop its agricultural sector as one result of the closed-door discussions between the leaders of the two countries, the newspaper said. According to a joint statement issued on the closed-door meeting, Arroyo said that Brunei had shown interest in seeking assistance from the Philippines in rice production as Brunei hoped to achieve self-sufficiency in agriculture production. Arroyo said that her country will send a delegation to visit Brunei to discuss mutual cooperation in agriculture.

- **Brunei to export IT products to Philippines**

Brunei has signed deals with the Philipines to export information and communications technology
products (ICT) to its Southeast Asian neighbor, according to reports reaching here on Saturday.

The Brunei Economic Development Board (BEDB) and three Brunei firms Friday inked separate deals with Philippine-based Crestar Communications to pave the way for Brunei to export its ICT products to the Philippines, the Brunei Times reported.The signing of the deals coincided with Brunei Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah's three-day state visit to the Philippines, which was ending on Saturday, the Brunei newspaper said.The three Brunei firms Expansys Technologies, Mimit e- Technology and Rafiqun WDSI have been identified as having ready- to-deploy innovative technologies with applications in both the commercial and public sectors in the Philippines, the daily said.Expansys Technologies aims to launch its text or short messaging system gateway technology as the preferred platform in delivering the integrated systems of Mesh, IPTV and GPS technology in the Philippines, according to the newspaper.Mimit e-Technology

intends to launch its V-track system, a global positioning system tracking system for fleets as well as an Islamic mobile content application developed for the Muslim communities in the Philippines.Rafiqun WDSI plans to deliver its Wireless Mesh Device and IPTV to serve the Philippines market.They will also be bringing in their expertise in wirelessdesign, e-commerce and e-government consultancy services to the country.

Social Front

- **Brunei to send more peacekeepers to S Philippines (pol,eco)**

Brunei will increase its contingent of peacekeepers in the International Monitoring Team (IMT) that currently oversees the peace process in Mindanao, the Philippines, according to reports reaching here on Saturday.

Brunei has agreed to increase the number of peacekeepers there from current 10 to 30 after visiting Brunei Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah and Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo held bilateral meeting in Manila on Friday, the Borneo Bulletin said on Saturday.

Brunei has been part of the IMT since 2004 and it sent 10 new personnel to the IMT last year. Brunei Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah arrived in the Philippines on Thursday for a three-day state visit to the country.

- **Muslim rebels turn to extortion: military**

Muslim separatist guerrillas in Mindanao are attacking rural businesses as part of extortion schemes, the military charged on Saturday.

Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) fighters have burned equipment belonging to construction companies here and warned of further destruction unless they are paid a monthly protection fee, the military said.Regional military spokeswoman Lieutenant Steffani Cachoe said the rebels were resorting to extortion to "project their power and sustain their daily operations.

The government is seeking to resume peace talks with the MILF which stalled when the Supreme Court struck down a draft accord that would have given the rebels autonomy over their own Muslim homeland in the south.The 12,000-strong MILF has been fighting to set up an Islamic state in the southern third of this largely Christian Southeast Asian

nation for more than three decades.The group signed a ceasefire with the government in 2003 to negotiate peace.

- **Arroyo to Discuss Rights, More Job Opportunities for Filipinos in Bahrain**

President of Philippines Maria Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo is scheduled to arrive in Bahrain today as part of plan to push for more job opportunities and labour rights for its citizens in Bahrain.

Councilor General at the Philippines Embassy Jose Burgos told Khaleej Times on Monday that the visit would discuss labour affairs and the rights and interests of the Filipino community in Bahrain that are estimated by 40,000 individuals.

He said that she would meet later today people in the community to discuss their needs and future plans.

Burgos said that the visit would also explore new job opportunities of Filipinos in Bahrain."Maids contributions to national economy are much less than other overseas workers, so working in Philippines is better than migrating to foreign countries and exposed to maltreatment." "We have only less than 3000 Filipino domestic workers and we are moving to reduce the number as the focus is on posts with high salaries," Burgos revealed.

- **More Filipinos expecting better life in 2009, reports SWS**

More Filipinos are optimistic about their lives getting better this year compared to those who expect it to become worse, a survey by the Social Weather Stations (SWS) found out. The survey results revealed that 30 percent of adult Filipinos expect their personal quality of life to improve in the next 12 months, while 15 percent expect it to get worse.

According to the SWS, net personal optimism—which is the percentage of optimists minus the percentage of pessimists—increased to 16 percent after being merely mediocre, ranging from 9 percent to minus 6 percent, during the first three quarters of 2008. The survey noted that personal optimism rose in all areas of the Philippines.

Optimism also rose by nine points in the balance of Luzon, from 8 percent to 17 percent; by five points in the Visayas, from 6 percent to 11 percent; and by three points in Mindanao, from 14 percent to 17 percent. The balance of Luzon refers to all regions on the main island, except the National Capital Region.

Economic brackets

Meanwhile, the same survey found out that those saying their lives had worsened slightly decreased to 43 percent from 47 percent last quarter. The number of those who said their lives had improved, on other hand, rose from 15 percent to 19 percent.

Economic outlook

Optimism that the Philippine economy would improve went up to 18 percent in December from 13 percent in September 2008. Pessimism on the country's economy was almost unchanged, with 37 percent in September and 38 percent in December. The SWS reported that the net economic optimism score (percentage of those optimistic about the economy minus percentage of pessimists) slightly got better from a low minus 24 percent to minus 20 percent. SWS noted that while personal optimism has risen in all areas, economic pessimism has also eased.

Pessimism eased in class E, from minus 22 percent to minus 8 percent, and in classes A, B and C, from minus 30 percent to low minus 22 percent. It stayed at minus 24 percent in class D. The SWS Fourth Quarter of 2008 survey was conducted from November 28 to December 1, 2008 using face-to-face interviews of 1,500 adults in Metro Manila, the balance of Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao. Margins of error are plus or minus 2.5 percent for national percentages, plus or minus 6 percent for Metro Manila, Visayas and Mindanao, and plus or minus 4 percent for the balance of Luzon.

- **800,000 jobless Filipinos?**

SOME 800,000 Filipinos are in danger of losing their jobs this year as the global economic slowdown hits the export sector, Economic Planning Secretary Ralph Recto said on Monday.

'Roughly 800,000 are vulnerable to the global crisis,' he told a news briefing at the presidential palace. He said workers in the export sector, including in the key electronics industry, as well as Filipinos working in export-driven economies abroad, were most at risk.

Mr Recto's figures are nearly triple initial projections made by Labour Secretary Marianito Roque last week, when he warned that 300,000 jobs could be lost in the Philippines amid the global crisis this year.

More than 15,000 workers have been laid off in the past two months, mostly in the electronics and garments sectors, while 19,000 others saw their work weeks shortened as exports plunged, according to government data.

Mr Recto said it would be 'tough' to meet the government's target of creating one million jobs a year in 2009, even assuming that the economy grew at 4.6 per cent, as it did in 2008. The 800,000 who are expected to be laid off this year would make for an even tougher job hunt for some 900,000 Filipinos who will be looking for a job for the first time, including those graduating from university and technical schools, Recto said.

He did not say what percentage of those expected to lose their jobs would be Filipinos laid off abroad.

Some 8.5 million Filipinos work or live abroad, sending some US$15 billion (S$22.7 billion) to their families back home in the 11 months to November 2008 according to central bank figures.

- **Ebola virus hits more pig farmers in the Philippines**

Four more workers at pig farms in the Philippines have contracted the Ebola-Reston subtype of Ebola virus, in addition to a case reported two weeks ago.

All five, identified by the presence of antibodies to the virus in their blood, worked with sick pigs and were probably infected more than six months ago. Ebola Reston was discovered last year in pigs on Luzon, the largest island in the Philippines (see *Nature* **457,** 364–365; 2009). The virus has yet to trigger any symptoms in humans, but could mutate into more virulent forms inside pigs or other animal carriers.

Health authorities are now testing acquaintances of the infected five to see whether human-to-human transmission might have occurred.

- **ANC Mindanao forum: Expert group proposed for RP-MILF talks**

An expert group that is associated neither with the government nor the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) should be formed immediately to lay the groundwork for the resumption of the peace talks between both sides.

This was among the proposals discussed during the forum "Mindanao: The Way Forward" that was organized by ANC, the ABS-CBN News Channel, and held at the Marco Polo Hotel in Davao City.The two-part forum—the first of its kind after the failed signing of the proposed homeland deal in August last year—brought together the protagonists in the peace process as well as nearly all the sectors that have a stake in it. It was a frank and intelligent exchange of ideas on what continues to cause the conflict in Mindanao and how the region could move forward.Irene Santiago, a former vice presidential bet and key civil society leader in Mindanao, said that the expert group could do the groundwork for both sides and submit to them a set of recommendations before the resumption of the peace talks. This will make the process more inclusive, since this group may also use the time to educate the public on the need to peacefully settle the conflict in the region, according to Santiago.

Santiago joined a spectrum of experts, public officials, business people, military officers and civil society leaders who all attended the ANC forum that was organized in partnership with Embassy of Canada and The Asia Foundation.

- **Navy officer says Basilan situation getting worse**

One of the top Philippine Navy officers in the region has admitted Wednesday that the situation in Basilan province is getting worse following the abduction of two employees of a microfinance firm in Sumisip town Tuesday night.

Commodore Alexander Pama, Naval Forces regional head, told ABS-CBN Zamboanga that amid their efforts to keep a peaceful and orderly Basilan, their effort seems not enough. He said the situation is throwing challenges at the military forces in the island.A measure being studied now by the military is the re-alignment of troops and forces in Basilan, he said.Pama admitted they lack forces particularly in the western part of Basilan where the recent abduction incident happened. Only one battalion of the Philippine Marines is deployed in the area and was not enough to secure the entire western part of the province, said Pama.Aside from re-aligning Marine troops in Basilan, Naval Forces Western Mindanao Combined is studying a proposal to have more or less 100 Civilian Auxiliary Forces Geographic Unit (CAFGU) members to be deployed in Basilan.Basilan currently has more than 2,000 CAFGU members deployed in the entire province.The military meanwhile also disclosed that they are studying possibility of conducting military operations over the kidnapping cases but with blessings from the crisis management committee of Basilan.Pama said that although the Armed Forces have the mandate to operate and run after lawless elements, the military's utmost concern is the safety of the hostages.

Kidnappers in the province are holding eight hostages this time, the three teachers - Janette delos Reyes, Rafael Mayonado and Freires Quizon - and businessman Eliseo Hablo all from Zamboanga city; midwife Eleazar Gomera and a nine-year old boy all from Lamitan City. The recent victims were Leah Patris and Ammad Sali Illang, employees of a microfinance firm in Sumisip.The military called on all stakeholders to be one with government forces in addressing the kidnapping problem in this part of the region.

- **Philippines government concerned over Mindanao kidnappings**

The Philippine government has expressed alarm over the rising incidence of kidnapping in southern Mindanao.

Eleven people, including three International Red Cross workers, have been abducted in the region since December.Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro is leading efforts to recover kidnap victims and stop abductions in the provinces of Sulu, Zamboanga and Basilan.
He ordered investigations on the kidnappings, including the possibility that these may be connected to efforts to raise funds for the presidential elections next year. Security officials say the local extremist group Abu Sayyaf is running low on funds and could be abducting people to raise money. Police checkpoints have been put up and the cooperation of civilians solicited to try to stop the kidnapping.

- **Philippine military poised to rescue hostages**

It appears the military option will be used to rescue the three kidnapped aid workers of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Government troops and civilian volunteers Thursday were positioned around a barangay (village) in Indanan, Sulu, where the Abu Sayyaf kidnappers are believed to be holding their captives, according to a Philippine Daily Inquirer informant.Also Thursday, Sulu Gov. Abdusakur Tan met with Maj. Gen. Juancho Sabban, the chief of Task Force Comet, and other local officials, according to the informant who asked not to be named for lack of authority to speak on the matter.

A number of personnel of the US Joint Special Operations Task Force Philippines attended the brief closed-door meeting that started at 8 am, the informant said.

Mayors' commitment

The Inquirer repeatedly tried to reach Governor Tan on his mobile phone, to no avail.Mayor Hussin Amin of Jolo, Sulu, who was present at the meeting, said the governor merely talked about solid waste management and peace and security matters.Amin refused to comment on the military movements, but confirmed that Tan had inquired about the commitment of the town mayors to back a military operation.

According to Amin, barangay guards have been mobilized to conduct human blockades around the area where Swiss Andreas Notter, Italian Eugenio Vagni and Filipino Mary Jean Lacaba are reportedly being held.

Pullout 'impossible'

The three ICRC aid workers were abducted by Abu Sayyaf bandits on Jan. 15 while they were in a van heading to the Jolo airport.

The military was relieved to hear their voices in an interview Thursday afternoon with radio station dzEC.But Armed Forces spokesperson Lt. Col. Ernesto Torres said the military would not give in to the demand of Abu Sayyaf commander Albader Parad to pull government troops out of Sulu.Torres, along with reporters in Camp Aguinaldo, listened to the 14-minute dzEC interview with Parad and the captives.

Parad said his group would not negotiate with anyone for the captives' release if the military continued its operations on the island.Commented Torres: "I don't know what he means by that... We may suspend combat operations, but we can never pull out our troops from the island in the middle of a crisis. It's impossible."

He said the suspension of military operations, such as the regular and intensive security patrols in certain areas in Sulu, might be implemented to give way to negotiations, per the recommendation of the multi-agency body handling the rescue of the three ICRC aid workers.But up to now, the Task Force ICRC has yet to advise the military of a temporary suspension of its operations in the area.

Torres also said the military could not forgo intelligence and information gathering in an effort to rescue the captives.

- **West Papua Camp Demolitioned By Indonesia Police**

West Papua Emergency Camp Demolitioned By Indonesia Police & Government.

Sentani, [kabarpapua.com] - Indonesia Police and the government of Jayapura Regent break down West Papuan Emergency Camp. West Papua emergency camp is bild besides Theys H. Eluay. The West Papua emergency camp built because West Papua under emergency zone and all West Papua people from outside (in Indonesia) making exodus. They are going back to home because of West Papua need self determinations. It's

Indonesia's crime to West Papua.

However, the UN Committee of Indigenous People Right said the Indigenous People have the right to manage their political right, their economic right, Social right, include the right for self determinations. We as the owner the land, but why Indonesia Government break down the camp like the land is not ours, said the coordinator of the camp. It's the crime to Indigenous People

The regent of Habel Melkias Suwae as the chef of the local Indonesia Government didn't appreciate to local Indigenous People Culture. The value of West Papua culture is should appreciate by all people, include Indonesia Government. But, Habel who was collaborate with the Indonesia Police Chef, Indonesia Military Commando in Papua, and specially the Central Government of Indonesia in Jakarata has clean the activities in the park.

Habel Melkias Suwae has gotten money Rp.2 Milliard from Indonesia businessman, he is going to build Indonesia's merchant company near the park, and will use the Memorial Park of Human Right Abuses and Freedom as a place to campaign his party for Indonesia Election 2009.

The camp which was built for struggling the basic right of Indigenous people has broken by Indonesia Police and Indonesia Government thought Local People who have been used to kill down West Papuan right.

Up til now, the emergency camp moved out beside Papuan Leader, Theys H. Eluay's house. And all West Papua People from out land (Indonesia) are preparing and others on the ship to West Papua.The right of Indigenous People of West Papua are in the Emergency Conditions. International Intervention needed.

ends

- **Indonesian president calls on Chinese ethnic to make efforts for country's development**

Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono said here Sunday that his government opposes any kind of discrimination and hoped the Indonesian Chinese united with other ethnics to make efforts for economic development and political stability of the country. The president made the remarks when attending a grand celebration of the Chinese New Year. He said the Chinese community in Indonesia has enjoyed the same rights with other ethnics in the country since it entered the reform period in 2000. "The Indonesian Chinese is a member of the big family of the Republic of Indonesia," he stressed. Accompanied by a number of cabinet ministers and senior officials, the president arrived at the Jakarta Convention Center, Central Jakarta at 14:00 local time and were welcomed by more than 8,000 people.

This is the 10th time that a national celebration was held during the Chinese New Year in Indonesia since former President Abdurrahman Wahid restored the equal legal rights of the Chinese in the country in 2000. During the celebration, dances and songs with distinctive national features were played by local literature and art organizations.

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• Thailand

Political Front

- **Pressures mount on new Thai PM**

Abhisit Vejjajiva took office as Thailand's prime minister last month promising political reconciliation and economic revival, but his honeymoon has been short.

On Friday, Mr Abhisit was confronted with evidence of the worsening economic picture. The central bank reported that December's manufacturing output fell by nearly a fifth from a year before, exports fell 16 per cent and tourist arrivals were down 27 per cent. The finance ministry said this week that the economy could shrink in the three months to March for a second consecutive quarter.

Meanwhile, his hold on power is set to be challenged. Supporters of Thaksin Shinawatra, the former prime minister, plan to surround Mr Abhisit's office on Saturday clad in red shirts, emulating tactics used to paralyse last year's government by the yellow-shirted supporters of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD).

They are pressing for the dismissal of his foreign minister, elections, reinstatement of the 1997 constitution and swifter prosecution of the protesters who occupied Bangkok's airports last year.

- **Thai neighbours silent on Rohingyas:**

Thailand's Muslim-majority neighbours Indonesia and Malaysia have been conspicuously quiet over Bangkok's alleged inhumane treatment of Rohingya Muslims fleeing Burma, *write John Aglionby and John Burton*.

Rights groups claim some 1,000 refugees were abandoned at sea by the Thai military with scarce supplies and in unpowered vessels. Some 650 have since been rescued.

Neither Malaysia nor Indonesia has commented directly on the incident. Three weeks ago, 193 people from the group washed ashore on an Indonesian island, but officials on Friday said it was still premature to judge what might have happened as interviews were still ongoing.

Malaysia has long been circumspect on commenting on the treatment of Muslims in Thailand, even when ethnic Malays were being killed by security forces in southern Thailand several years ago. Malaysia has also been criticised by international human rights groups for its treatment of illegal Muslim immigrant workers, including the Rohingyas.For the moment, most Thais seem willing to allow Mr Abhisit some leeway to cope with the country's manifold economic problems, but analysts are warning that time is running short.

● Thailand's divisions have dominated its politics for the past three years.

On the streets, the division appears as a conflict between the red-shirted supporters of Thaksin Shinawatra, the former premier who welded the country's rural poor into a potent politial force, and the yellow-shirted supporters of the People's Alliance for Democracy, which draws its support from the country's middle classes, supported by elements in the army, monarchists and big business.

The PAD managed to paralyse the last government with a series of increasingly disruptive protests. The election of a new government has gone some way to placating the PAD but has enraged Mr Thaksin's supporters, leading to fears of a return to political paralysis.

Strategic Front

Economic Front

- **Thailand parliament approves economic stimulus package**

Early yesterday passed a US$3.35 billion stimulus package aimed at boosting the flagging economy after months of street protests and last year's crippling airport seizures.

After 11 hours of debate between the Democrat Party-led government and the opposition, lawmakers voted just after midnight for the 116.7 billion baht (US$3.35 billion) supplementary budget for this fiscal year.

Thai House speaker Chai Chidchob said 238 lawmakers out of a total of 455 voted in favor of the bill, which now has to go through two more readings — largely a formality — before taking effect.The package is a mixture of cash handouts for low earners, tax cuts, education loans, and subsidies for transport and utilities, which the government's finance team says will stimulate consumer spending.The Bank of Thailand has forecast economic growth at zero to 2 percent this year, with the weeklong shuttering of Bangkok's two airports by protesters late last year and the global financial crisis taking a

toll.Critics of the stimulus package including ousted prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra have decried the plan as a short-term fix to a long-term problem. Chalerm Yoobamrung, opposition lawmaker with the Thaksin-linked Puea Thai party, called the 2,000 baht handouts "advance vote buying" and said the package would not reach all sectors.
The Democrat Party led by Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva came to power in a parliamentary vote last month after a court dissolved the Thaksin-linked People Power Party (PPP) less than a year after it won elections.The court ruling brought an end to more than six months of protests against the PPP, which peaked with the Nov. 25 through Dec. 3 siege of Bangkok's two airports, which battered tourism and the economy. This story has been viewed 414 times.

- **Thailand looks to scrap visa fees to boost tourism**

Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva said his government may waive visa fees for all tourists for three months in a bid to boost visitor numbers following last year's siege of Bangkok's airports.

Abhisit -- who has come under fire for including in his government members of the protest group that seized the airports in November -- said late Thursday there could also be discounts on aircraft landing fees.

Nationals of 41 countries including the United States, most European nations, Japan, Australia and New Zealand already do not require a visa to enter Thailand if their stay does not exceed 30 days.Tourism in Thailand has taken a hit from both the global economic downturn and the anti-government protests in late November that led to a blockade of Bangkok's two airports for more than a week.The siege left 350,000 travellers stranded in Bangkok and dented the kingdom's tourist-friendly image.The government has allocated one billion baht (A$39.2 million) of a 115-billion-baht fiscal stimulus package to boost tourism.

Abhisit was elected prime minister in December, after a court verdict which removed the previous government from power and persuaded protesters to lift the airport blockade.

Separately, Phornsiri Manoharn, governor of Tourism Authority of Thailand, was quoted on the Thai government's website as projecting 14.8 million tourist arrivals this year.She said there were 14.2 million tourist arrivals in Thailand in 2008, below the targeted figure of 15.7 million.

- **Tourism groups forecast 14 million**

Despite challenging economic conditions, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), together with related state agencies and private-sector organisations, jointly issued a forecast yesterday of 14 million foreign visitors generating about 505 billion baht for Thailand in 2009.This consensus is based on all agencies providing full support and co-

operation to promote tourism, and on political conflicts being resolved without serious incidents, said TAT chairman Weerasak Kohsurat, a former tourism minister.

This collaborative forecast is a first. It is a part of an ambitious plan to restore the sector, which suffered last year, particularly from the forced closure of two Bangkok international airports.

Revenue last year from domestic tourism was 432 billion baht in 2008, unchanged from 2007. Domestic tourists are expected to generate only 400 billion baht this year due to economic constraints.stimulate tourism, the cabinet recently agreed to waive visa fees for three months, to reduce landing fees by 20% for regular flights and up to 50% for chartered flights, and to waive property taxes for hotel operators.

But the cabinet has yet to approve the one billion baht request by the Tourism and Sports Ministry for reviving tourism.Thai Travel Agents Association president Apichart Sankary anticipated only 12.8 million foreign visitors in the absence of government support.

- **Economist magazine blocked in Thailand again**

The Economist's distributors in Thailand are refusing to circulate the current affairs magazine for a second week running because of an article critical of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and the army.

The article, entitled 'A sad slide backwards', takes Thailand to task for its "astoundingly callous" handling of 1,000 Muslim Rohingya migrants from Myanmar, 500 of whom are feared to have died after being towed out to sea by the army and cast adrift.

A spokesman for the distributor, Asia Books, was not immediately available for comment. A police spokesman said he was unaware of any official ban.Unlike with previous editions of the magazine that have not been circulated, this week's article makes only cursory mention of the taboo topic of royal involvement in politics and draconian lese majeste laws.

Most of its criticism is aimed at the army and the Oxford-educated Abhisit, whose rise to power last month owes much to the military's 2006 coup against Thaksin Shinawatra and its machinations against the previous government.The article also suggests the United States should threaten to move its annual Cobra Gold regional war games from Thailand -- a hangover from its Vietnam War-era alliance that begins next week -- to send a signal to Bangkok's generals.

During his six weeks in office, Abhisit has made much of his commitment to human rights and the rule of law, although his government has shut down more than 2,000 websites deemed critical of the monarchy.

A prominent leftist academic has also been charged with lese majeste -- which carries up to 15 years in jail -- for comments made in a 2007 book about the previous year's military

coup.Critics and freedom of speech advocates say the government's crusade to protect the crown in the twilight years of King Bhumibol Adulyadej's six decade reign is a pretext to crush political dissent and opposition.

- **Thai gov't suspends foreign workers' registration**

Thailand's government had decided to postpone a registration of thousands of foreign workers in a move to keep jobs open for Thais as the economic slump was looming.

The Thai Labor Ministry under the previous government planned to register about 800,000 foreign workers to ease the shortage of unskilled labor in 10 sectors, including fisheries, farming and construction.

Initially, the ministry backed the registration plan, however, the abrupt change in the country's employment situation had prompted the ministry to reverse its position, Labor Minister Paitoon Kaewthong said Thursday, the Bangkok Post's website reported on Friday.

Some 2,863 Thai workers have reportedly lost their jobs in January this year and the country's higher number of unemployed is expected, said the Ministry of Labor on Wednesday. Central bank -- The Bank of Thailand forecasted that for 2009 in the worst case scenario the country's unemployment rate would rise to 3.7 percent or around 1.4 million. Wednesday, the Thai cabinet resolved to extend the unemployment compensation period for laid-off workers from six months to eight months.Thai army officer: soldiers not assigned to blend in with protesters during Saturday mass rally.

- **Thai army officer: soldiers not assigned to blend in with protesters during Saturday mass rally**

Soldiers were not assigned to blend in with protesters during Saturday's planned mass rally by the anti-government -- Democratic Alliance Against Dictatorship's (DAAD), the website by Bangkok Post reported Friday.

The DAAD group announced Thursday they planned to stage the mass rally at Bangkok's open field Sanam Luang on Saturday afternoon and later on Saturday night they would march to the Government House.

Dissolving the lower House is one among their political demands. First Army commander Khanit Sapitak dismissed the claim by the DAAD that 400 soldiers were assigned to blend in with the DAAD-led protesters on Saturday night, the website reported. The claim by DAAD's core leader Jakrapob Penkair was baseless, said Lt-Gen Khanit, adding that there was no need for soldiers to do so. Soldiers would assist police to ensure safety, if they were requested to do so, Lt-Gen Khanit said, the website reported.

The DAAD group is also known as the red-shirted people as this anti-government DAAD group is set up by supporters of ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra.

Social Front

- **Thai Deputy PM: Police would take action if anti-gov't protesters break laws**

Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban said here Friday that police would take action if the anti-government protesters who planned to stage a mass rally at the Government House on Saturday break laws. The anti-government Democratic Alliance Against Dictatorship announced Thursday they planned to stage a mass rally at Bangkok's open field Sanam Luang on Saturday afternoon and later on Saturday night they would march to the Government House.

Dissolving the Lower House is among their political demands.

Suthep, Deputy Prime Minister in charge of security affairs, said he had instructed Police Chief Pol. Gen. Patcharawat Wongsuwan to mobilize the police to control the expected crowd to prevent any action that would break law, the website by The Nationnewspaper reported Friday.

He warned that the police would be held responsible for duty negligence if no immediate action was taken against any lawbreakers, the website quoted Suthep as saying. Separately, Minister of Defense General Prawit Wongsuwan said Friday that the military is ready if the police ask for help, the website by Thai-language newspaper Thai Rath reported. Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, who was now attending the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, said he was not concerned about the planned mass rally by the anti-government group, The Nation newspaper's website said.

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- **UNHCR wants transparent investigation**

Bangkok: The United Nations yesterday called on the Thai government for a "transparent" investigation into reports that the navy last month took an estimated 1,000 Rohingya refugees out to sea and set them adrift in boats without engines or supplies. "We feel very strongly that this needs to be the subject of a transparent investigation," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) regional representative Raymond Hall said.

Hall expressed his concern over the ongoing investigation after meeting with Thai Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya yesterday morning. "Thailand has a long history of cooperating with the UNHCR on the refugee issue, especially with boat people," said Kasit. Thailand has promised to cooperate with the UNHCR in finding a long-term solution to the plight of the Rohingya, a minority Muslim group from the North Arakan State in Myanmar. Myanmar's junta denied the Rohingya citizenship in 2006, and has been persecuting the Muslim community of Bangladeshi origin since the early 1990s. An estimated 250,000 Rohingyas live in refugees camps in Bangladesh.

Thousands risk their lives annually searching for work in neighbouring South-EAst Asian countries. According to Thai authorities already 20,000 illegal Rohingyas are living in the kingdom.

Thai Prime Mister Abhisit Vejjajiva has promised an investigation into the claims that the Thai navy used undue cruelty to pushing back the Rohingya last month. The incident has proven a major embarrassment for his newly installed government which has made the upholding of human rights and rule of law a priority. But Abhisit has reportedly assigned the Internal Security Command Operation (ISOC) to conduct the investigation.

Reports that the Thai navy had beaten and dragged out to the high sea at least six boat-loads of Rohnigyas in December, began to emerge earlier this month based on the testimony of survivors who were rescued by the Indian and Indonesian navies.

The refugees claimed that at least 500 of the boat people have gone missing and are feared drowned. The UNHCR was denied access to 126 Rohingya boat people - 80 of whom were allegedly victims of the December push-back — who were still Thai custody last week.

But the Thai foreign ministry said the 126 were “escorted” out of Thailand before the UNHCR could interview them. The UN agency is now seeking access to a fresh batch of 78 Rohingyas who were captured by the Thai navy on Tuesday.

- **Junta denies Rohingya boat people are from Burma**

Burma's junta has denied the Rohingya boat people washing up in Thailand, India and Indonesia are from its soil.

In a statement carried by all state controlled papers, the junta says "the Rohingya is not included in the over 100 national races of the Union of Myanmar".

In its first reaction since reports surfaced of the Thai army towing the Rohingyas out to sea and leaving them to die, the junta nonetheless promised to take unspecified "measures" on the matter.More than 500 Rohingya are feared to have drowned since early December.According to the UNHCR, 230,000 Muslim Rohingya now live a precarious stateless existence in Bangladesh, having fled their ancestral homes in Burma's north-west.Those who have not fled are restricted from travel inside the country.

- **Thousands of Thai police to be deployed at pro-Thaksin rally**

More than 5,000 police are to be deployed in the Thai capital on Saturday as supporters of ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra hold a massive anti-government protest, police said on Friday.

The group plans to rally in a Bangkok park before marching to Government House to make a series of demands, adopting the tactics of their foes who occupied the main government offices for three months last year.

Lieutenant General Suchart Mueankaoe, commander of Bangkok Metropolitan police, said 5,250 officers would police the event. He said a further 22 companies of police would be on stand by. Each police company has 150 officers while a military company has about 80. The protesters, so-called "Red Shirts" as they wear crimson in opposition to the anti-Thaksin People's Alliance for Democracy's yellow clothes, said they can rally up to 50,000 people to Saturday's demonstration. But police said they expected 20,000 people to present their three demands to government – for those involved in the siege of Bangkok's airports in November to be fired from government jobs and then prosecuted and for parliament to be dissolved. National police chief General Patcharawat Wongsuwan has promised not to obstruct the rally but vowed to arrest any protesters who violate the law.

They said the ruling People Power Party (PPP) was running the country on behalf of Thaksin, who was ousted in a 2006 coup. As a figure, he remains enormously divisive, despite living in exile for most of the time since the putsch.
The PAD escalated their campaign and seized Bangkok's two airports from November 25 to December 3, and eventually got their wish when a court dissolved the PPP and forced

then-premier Somchai Wongsawat from office. The move paved the way for the Democrat Party's Abhisit Vejjajiva to be elected prime minister in a parliamentary vote last month.

• Singapore

Political Front

- **S'pore, Indonesia working out details of border agreement signing ceremony**

Singapore is pleased that it has been able to resolve its long-standing maritime border dispute with Indonesia. A brief statement from Singapore's Foreign Affairs Ministry says details of the signing ceremony are being worked out.

Both sides had recently reached an agreement over their maritime boundary in the western segment of the Singapore Strait, after over three years of negotiations. It involves the area around Indonesia's Nipah Island, in the Riau Islands, nearest to Singapore. Indonesia's President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono said on Monday that the settlement will ensure Indonesia's economic development in the area and ensure economic cooperation with Singapore and Malaysia, which also shares a maritime border in the Riau Islands.

Strategic Front

- **Singapore to mark 25 years of total defence on Feb 15**

Singapore will commemorate 25 years of total defence with a series of activities on February 15. Called "TD25", the event will be held at the Suntec City Tropics Atrium.

Among the programmes lined up is a musical revue called "Five Pillars, One Roof", which will bring together various local talents. Winning entries of a national animation competition called "N.E.mation! III" will be shown, alongside a collection of five short films produced by students on total defence called "Singapore 2034". Visitors will also be able to enjoy interactive games such as jigsaw puzzles and giant board games that test participants on their understanding of total defence. Singapore commemorates Total Defence Day every February 15, the day Singapore fell to the Japanese in 1942.

Economic Front

- **Budget meant to have multiplier effect on whole economy**

The S$20.5 billion Resilience Package is the right budget for the times. The aim is to give broad-based help, yet be simple enough to be rolled out quickly this year. Finance

Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam said this in response to parliamentary queries raised during the three days of debate on the Budget Statement.

The House has not been short of suggestions to improve the current economic situation. But Mr Tharman said it is a fine balance. Ultimately, Mr Tharman said, the package has three key objectives - jobs for Singaporeans, direct help for households and building confidence in the future even as it looks at immediate challenges.

As for direct help, the minister rejected the proposal for a GST cut, saying lower and middle income households will receive more in GST Credits than they can save from a 2 per cent GST reduction. He added that the money gained from the 7 per cent GST is an important source of revenue to fund additional social support during this crisis.

On the Jobs Credit scheme, some MPs had argued it was not right for all companies to be rewarded equally and that less aid be given to those already profitable.

Mr Tharman said the beauty of the system is in its simplicity and that it is more of a broad-based help measure meant to have a multiplier effect on the economy. Realistically, Mr Tharman said, there is no way to avoid retrenchments in this recession. However, because the help measures are tied to Singaporean jobs, it will still make a difference to the pace and scale of job losses.

- **Singapore shares close 0.39% higher**

- Singapore shares closed 0.39 per cent higher on Tuesday in sluggish trade, dealers said. The blue-chip Straits Times Index rose 6.63 points to 1,711.92 on a volume of 649 million shares worth S$630 million. Losers beat gainers 193 to 145, with 905 issues unchanged.
Bank shares closed mixed, with United Overseas Bank gaining eight cents to S$11.62 and DBS closing five cents higher at S$8.55. Oversea-Chinese Banking Corp eased two cents to S$4.98.

Among property shares, City Developments was unchanged at S$5.51, CapitaLand rose a cent to S$2.39 and Keppel Land fell a cent to S$1.38. Singapore Telecommunications dropped one cent to S$2.55, while Singapore Airlines closed two cents higher at S$11.06.

- **Economic downturn presents opportunities for entrepreneurs**

A number of Singaporeans have lost their jobs as a result of the recent global financial turmoil. Many are hunting for stable employment in the current period of uncertainty.

But observers said this environment is the perfect breeding ground for the next generation of entrepreneurs. Henry Tan, former president, Spirit of Enterprise, said: "If you're having a cushy job, getting a big amount of money, then the push factor for you to go out is much lesser.

Experts said there are distinct advantages to becoming an entrepreneur when the economy is bad. For one, start-up costs are relatively lower. Retrenched workers not only have cash payouts that can help them get started on a new business, they also have the skills and connections that will help start their own business in the same industry. To ensure a higher rate of success, industry watchers said that businesses with low capital investments and overhead costs is a good place to start. Trading and online businesses for example allow entrepreneurs to test the market response without incurring huge expenses. According to the Department of Statistics, the number of start-up businesses increased by almost 2,000 between 2007 and 2008. But given the current economic crisis, this growth is expected to dip in 2009. To encourage aspiring entrepreneurs, SPRING Singapore launched its SEEDS initiative last year.

- **Singapore firms in strong position to survive crisis**

Singapore companies could not have been in better shape when they entered the current economic downturn. According to data from DP Information Group, Singapore's companies were at their peak when the crisis hit in the second half of 2008, with net profit and revenues at five-year highs.

The next challenge now is how to use this advantage to stay afloat, as the downturn continues. Singapore's top 1,000 companies had accumulated strong reserves in the early part of last year, according to DP Information Group. It said by May 2008, these companies had an average of S$147 million in cash, which was 50 per cent more than what they put aside in 2007.

Firms had also been keeping borrowings stable prior to the downturn. Nearly nine in 10 of the 1,000 companies were also watching their debt. The group said that with comfortable borrowings, combined with record earnings and turnover, local companies were as well-prepared as they could be to face the downturn. All that remains is to make full use of this buffer to stay afloat as the crisis progresses.
The group said that slower times do not automatically translate to a higher risk of going under.
These figures were announced as part of DP Information's Singapore 1000, and SME 500 awards, which are now in their 22nd year.

- **S'pore partners WEF and others to form Global Cooperation System**

Singapore has joined Qatar and Switzerland in partnering the World Economic Forum (WEF) in its initiative to establish a Global Cooperation System (GCS).

The system, launched by the WEF in Davos, Switzerland on Friday, aims to develop an inter-disciplinary and inter-governmental approach to governance in addressing emerging global challenges.

Under the GCS initiative, the WEF will draw upon the resources of business, government, civil society, media and other leaders to develop recommendations to deal

with economic, environmental, geopolitical, societal and technological challenges.

Speaking at the launch of the GCS in Davos, Switzerland, Singapore Environment and Water Resources Minister Yaacob Ibrahim said: "To overcome the current global financial crisis, which has become a global economic crisis, we need better global governance backed by effective global institutions."

As a co-partner of the GCS initiative, Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) said the republic will support the initiative through soliciting views in Asia. Singapore will also help organise a WEF event later in the year in the city state as part of the WEF's year-long consultation process. MFA said the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy will help bring together experts and thought leaders from both Singapore and Asia to contribute to these consultations. Final recommendations will be presented at the WEF's Annual Meeting in Davos in 2010.

- **PM Lee urges S'poreans to be confident about future despite downturn**

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on Sunday called on Singaporeans to be confident about the country's future despite the current downturn. It comes just before the country's Parliament debates this year's record S$20.5 billion budget announced recently to help tide over the crisis. The Prime Minister joined some 1,400 residents of his Teck Ghee constituency at a community dinner to celebrate the Lunar New Year.

And he had an uplifting message for them.

And to get through the crisis, Mr Lee said Singaporeans must work closely together, especially to help the less fortunate tide over tough times. In Teck Ghee, low-income families got additional help, like 20 per cent more bursaries for needy students. The government is also investing in the long term, like upgrading public housing and providing new facilities for old estates. Mr Lee said: "We are different from other countries...the way we solve our problems, the way we work together, the way we focus on tackling what worries us now, and also what is coming over the horizon.And that, Mr Lee said, is how Singapore will emerge stronger from the slowdown.

- **Singapore must be disciplined about reserves: SM Goh**

Singapore's Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong has said the country must be disciplined and not dip into the reserves at the first sign of trouble.

And responding to suggestions that the government had broken the piggy bank in the recently announced Budget, Mr Goh also related three situations where Singapore should not draw on the reserves. He was speaking at his Marine Parade constituency's Lunar New Year event on Sunday.

The team also has the collective experience of government leaders who have brought Singapore out of five previous recessions - from 1965 to 2003 - to deal with the current one, the worst since 1964.

Mr Goh said: "In past recessions, no matter how difficult life was, we took the medicine, workers swallowed the bitter medicine prescribed, and worked hand-in-hand with the government to tackle the challenges, and the whole population rallied behind the government to pull the economy out of the recession. Sounding optimistic despite the challenges ahead, Mr Goh assured Singaporeans the government will help them cope. Among the unprecedented steps taken is using a portion of past reserves for the Resilience Package.

But that is not breaking the piggy bank Mr Goh is also clear about not touching the reserves for three things. He elaborated: "(First, there should be) no use of the reserves to support social assistance programmes. I am not saying there should be no social assistance programme. As a general principle, such programmes must be funded out of revenues raised in the current term of government, not past reserves. The Year of the Ox may have coincided with previous recessions of 1997 and 1985. But Mr Goh reminded Singaporeans that the Ox has shown its ability to survive them. And Mr Goh is confident that if Singaporeans worked together, the country will emerge from the economic crisis stronger than before. -

- **Slight increase in road fatalities in 2008, motorcyclists remain most vulnerable**

Road fatalities saw a slight increase last year - 222 compared to 214 the year before.

The Traffic Police said its latest findings still indicate motorcyclists and pillion riders remain the most vulnerable group. There are nearly 875,000 vehicles on Singapore's roads these days - up 6 per cent from 2007.

And despite the rise, the fatality rate has actually dipped. Christopher Ng, deputy assistant commissioner, Traffic Police, explained: "Against the backdrop of an increase in human and vehicle population, the number of fatalities has improved by 1.5 per cent to 4.59 fatalities per hundred thousand human population, and this compares favourably with other developed cities."

Of the 222 people killed on the roads in 2008, 23 died from car accidents. Twenty-two were killed riding bicycles, while 108 motorcyclists and their pillion riders lost their lives.

To help reduce the number of motorcycle accidents, the Traffic Police is revising the training curriculum for new bike licences. This will include three theory lessons on defensive riding, which will start by the middle of this year. This represents the first significant change to training methods in seven years.
Another area of concern is pedestrians. Of the 62 killed, 28 of them were the elderly. This is why the Traffic Police is embarking on a new campaign to raise road safety awareness among the elderly. While there were 14 fewer drink-driving related accidents in 2008, 22 people died as a result - seven more than the previous year. The number of drink driving arrests dropped by 424 to 3,586. The Traffic Police said it will continue with its Anti-Drink Drive campaign and the ring-fencing operations this year. It is also working with the Health Ministry to research the effects of alcohol intoxication on Asians.

- **Saving jobs will have bigger impact in boosting Singapore economy**

Putting cash directly into the hands of consumers to stimulate spending is not the best way to help Singapore's economy during the downturn.

Instead, the government believes keeping Singaporeans employed and helping businesses stay afloat makes more sense. It says this will eventually filter down to boost consumer spending, and will have other far-reaching effects. Speaking in Parliament on Thursday, Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam said this is why businesses and jobs are a key focus in this year's Budget. Members of Parliament have called for direct measures to deal with falling demand for goods and services during the Budget debate. These include cutting the Goods and Services Tax (GST) to encourage consumers to spend more.
But Mr Tharman said the government opted for a solution it believed would have the most effective and far-reaching benefits for the economy. The minister said a GST cut is unlikely to help Singaporeans or businesses as powerfully. He also said that the government has received positive feedback on measures such as the Special Risk-sharing Initiative (SRI) announced in this year's Budget. Under the SRI, the government takes 80 per cent of loan risk. Responding to MPs who said this will not directly encourage banks to lend, the minister said top market players, who account for more than 60 per cent of lending market, have provided positive feedback on the scheme.
Mr Tharman added that the amount of loans approved under SPRING's financing schemes went up by more than 50 per cent in January compared to the average over the previous two months.

The Singapore Business Federation and five enterprise development centres run by other business groupings are also actively helping companies with loan applications. Experienced ex-bankers have also been hired and roped in to assist.

- **Singapore's employment growth slows, jobless rate up at 2.6% in Q4**

Singapore’s unemployment rate in the last quarter of 2008 rose to a seasonally adjusted 2.6 per cent, up from 2.2 per cent in the third quarter on rising retrenchments with slowing employment growth and a weaker economy.

According to official data from the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) released Friday, about 73,100 Singapore residents were jobless in December, a steep 58 per cent jump year-on-year.
For the whole of 2008, the overall unemployment rate averaged 2.3 per cent (62,900 residents), up from a year ago which was 2.1 per cent (56,700 residents). This is the first time the annual average unemployment rate has increased since 2003, when it peaked at 4.0 per cent.

The rising unemployment rate was driven by increasing retrenchment as companies cut back on manpower to cope with the global financial meltdown. Preliminary estimates showed that some 7,000 workers were retrenched in the quarter endeDecember, up more than three-fold (1,966) from the same period a year ago. For the entire year, 13,400 workers were retrenched, almost twice that of 7,675 in 2007, mainly due to layoffs in the manufacturing and services sectors.

Alongside the rising redundancies, employment growth also dropped drastically in the fourth-quarter. Total employment came in at 26,900 – slowing by more than half as compared to 62,500 in the same period in 2007.

- **EDB's survey shows poor business sentiment in manufacturing and services sectors**

Two separate government surveys have confirmed that businesses in the manufacturing and services sectors have become more pessimistic.

Among them, hoteliers are most worried about the business outlook for the first half of 2009. Hoteliers were very much a part of the thrills of Singapore's first Formula One Grand Prix last year. But now, they are concerned about the spills of the economic downturn.

Business expectation for the hotel industry is least positive within the services sector. A Department of Statistics survey found that all the hotels surveyed are pessimistic about prospects in the first six months of 2009, with 81 per cent of them forecasting lower revenues in the first quarter.

Business sentiment is also low in the financial services, real estate and retail industries. The manufacturing sector is also expected to layoff more workers in the first quarter. According to an Economic Development Board (EDB) poll, the precision engineering and electronics clusters are least optimistic about employment opportunities. Analysts say the key problem facing businesses is demand-led, and there is not much businesses can do other than to keep costs down.The two separate surveys of companies in the manufacturing and services sectors were done just before the Budget announcement last week. Observers say the new measures introduced by the government will go some way to help businesses, but confidence in the short term is likely to remain depressed.

Social Front

- **Online network set up to share flu pandemic info with doctors**

The SingHealth cluster of public healthcare institutions in Singapore has established an online network to act as a one-stop information resource on flu pandemics.

Members of the PCC Network will be able to exchange information with health authorities. Network members include general practitioner (GP) clinics and dental clinics located near the nine SingHealth polyclinics in the eastern part of Singapore. A key objective of the PCC network is to implement the Ministry of Health's flu pandemic plan, should there be a pandemic outbreak. In addition, the website also provides useful medical resources for doctors, such as bird flu clinicnotices, a drug identification guide for elderly and illiterate patients, a doctor's clinical guidebook and a listing of GP clinics.

• Vietnam

Political Front

- **Obama's 'Vietnam' strategy**

You aren't really the U.S. president until you've ordered an air-strike on somebody, so Barack Obama is certainly president now: two in his first week in office. But now that he has been blooded, can we talk a little about this expanded war he's planning to fight in Afghanistan?

President Obama may be planning to shut Guantanamo, but the broader concept of a "war on terror" is still alive and well in Washington. Most of the people he has appointed to run his defense and foreign policies believe in it, and there is no sign that he himself questions it. Yet even 15 years ago the notion would have been treated with contempt in every military staff college in the country.

That generation of American officers learned two things from their miserable experience in Vietnam. One was that going halfway around the world to fight a conventional military campaign against an ideology (communism then, Islamism now) was a truly stupid idea. The other was that no matter how strenuously the other side insists that it is motivated by a world-spanning ideology, its real motives are mostly political and quite local (Vietnamese nationalism then, Iraqi and Afghan nationalism now).

The parallel with Vietnam is not all that far-fetched. Modest numbers of American troops have now been in Afghanistan for seven years, mostly in training roles quite similar to those of the U.S. military "advisers" whom Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy sent to

South Vietnam in 1956-63. The political job of creating a pro-Western, anti-communist state was entrusted to America's man in Saigon, Ngo Dinh Diem, and the South Vietnamese army had the job of fighting the Communist rebels, the Viet Cong.

Unfortunately, neither Diem nor the South Vietnamese army had much success, and by the early 1960s the Viet Cong were clearly on the road to victory. So Kennedy authorized a group of South Vietnamese generals to overthrow Diem (although he seemed shocked when they killed him). And Lyndon Johnson, who succeeded Kennedy soon afterwards authorized a rapid expansion of the American troop commitment in Vietnam, first to 200,000 by the end of 1965, ultimately to half a million by 1968. The United States took over the war. And then it lost it.

So the talk in Washington now is all of replacing Karzai (although it will probably be done via elections, which are easily manipulated in Afghanistan), and the American troop commitment in the country is going up to 60,000. Various American allies also have troops in Afghanistan, just as they did in Vietnam, but it is the United States that is taking over the war.We already know how this story ends. There is not a lot in common between President John F. Kennedy and President George W. Bush, but they were both ideological crusaders who got the United States mired in foreign wars it could not win and did not need to win. They then bequeathed those wars to presidents who had ambitious reform agendas in domestic politics and little interest or experience in foreign affairs.
That bequest destroyed Lyndon Johnson, who took the rotten advice of the military and civilian advisers he inherited from Kennedy because there wasn't much else on offer in Washington at the time. Obama is drifting into the same dangerous waters, getting rotten advice from strategists who believe in the "war on terror."

He has figured out that Iraq was a foolish and unnecessary war, but he has not yet applied the same analysis to Afghanistan. The two questions he needs to ask himself are first: Did Osama bin Laden wants the United States to invade Afghanistan in response to 9/11? The answer to that one is: Yes, of course he did.

And second: Of all the tens of thousands of people whom the United States has killed in Afghanistan and Iraq, would a single one have turned up in the United States to do harm if left unkilled? Answer: probably not. Other people might have turned up in the U.S. with evil intent, but not those guys.So turning Afghanistan into a second Vietnam is probably the wrong strategy, isn't it?

- **Gov’t orders smooth implementation of ASEAN charter**

The Prime Minister has appointed the Foreign Ministry as the national coordinator for regional cooperation in the process of building an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) community and executing the ASEAN charter.

In a recent decision, the Government leader also ordered all relevant agencies to maintain regular contact with each other via the sole national liaison channel, the National ASEAN Secretariat under the Foreign Ministry, to "ensure good coordination of action in formulating and executing national policies regarding ASEAN cooperation." The Foreign Minister has been entrusted with chairing the ASEAN Coordinating Council and the ASEAN Political-Security Community Council, whilst the Minister of Industry and Trade is to chair the ASEAN Economic Community Council. The Minister of Labour, War Invalids and Social Affairs will chair the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Council.

Strategic Front

Economic Front

- **Vietnam PM says no need to devalue dong**

There is no need to devalue the Vietnamese dong currency because there are enough dollars in the banking system and it would have an adverse impact on foreign debt, a newspaper quoted Primed Minister Nguyen Tan Dung as saying. 'If the domestic currency is devalued, making the exchange rate which now stands at a little over 17,000 dong per dollar rise to 18,000 per dollar it will be hard to predict how much Vietnam's current foreign debt of $18 billion will be, and how that will affect the budget balance,' the online version of the Saigon Times (www.thesaigontimes.vn) quoted Dung as saying.

- **Vietnam PM forecasts economy to recover by May**

Vietnam's PM Nguyen Tan Dung is optimistic about the future of the country's economy. [ABC]Vietnam's economy will pick up within the next three months, despite the impact of the global economic crisis, says Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung. "The economic slowdown will end by May," said Dung in a briefing, according to the government's website.Vietnam recorded a 6.2 per cent economic growth rate in 2008, the lowest level in almost a decade and a sharp drop from 2007's 8.5 per cent. The government has announced a stimulus package of spending and tax cuts to boost the economy, aiming for 6.5 per cent growth this year, a figure that the International Monetary Fund has predicted could be only 5 per cent.

- **Gov't reduces petrol import taxes by 10 percent**

The Government has cut preferential tax rates on imported petroleum to 25 percent from 35 percent. The new rate will be applied to imported petrol from Feb. 10.

The tax cut is a move to support petroleum importers at a time when global oil prices are predicted to rise.The Ministry of Finance issued a circular on Feb. 5 as an implementation guide for the new tax level for items belonging to group 2710 on the General Department of Taxation's import list.Under the circular, import taxes on some items, mostly leaded and non-leaded petrol, petrol for airplanes, lubricant, naphtha and reformatic petrol, will drop to 25 percent.

The ministry said that the decrease in petroleum was based on current stabilised petroleum prices. The world oil price is currently 42 USD per barrel. On January 24, theministry decided to cut import tax on petroleum items from 40 percent to 35 percent in order to support petroleum importers.

Last year each company consumed about 7.5 million litres of petrol and about 15-16 million litres of kerosene. Now the demand has been reduced, according to Petrolimex.

When Dung Quat Oil Refinery comes into operation later this month, petroleum imports will reach about 12.2 million tonnes this year. Of that volume, 1 million tonnes will be re-exported and domestic consumption will account for 11.2 million tonnes.-Enditem

- **Analyst sees declining oil production in Vietnam**

Analyst BMI has forecast a 3% reduction in Vietnamese oil production during 2007-18, with volumes peaking at 400,000 b/d in 2009-10 before slipping to 330,000 b/d by 2018.

In its latest Vietnam Oil & Gas Report, BMI also forecasts that Vietnam's oil consumption is expected to increase by 101% during 2007-18, with growth slowing to an assumed 6%/year towards the end of the period and the country using 598,000 b/d by 2018.
Meanwhile, BMI says that Vietnam will account for just 1.51% of Asia Pacific regional oil demand by 2013, while providing 4.52% of its supply. Asia Pacific regional oil use of 21.40 million b/d in 2001 climbed to 25.68 million b/d in 2007 and should average 26.32 million b/d in 2008 before rising to 29.65 million b/d by 2013. Vietnamese real GDP growth is forecast by BMI at 5.5% for 2008, down from the 2007 level of 8.5%. BMI is assuming 7% growth in 2009, followed by 8.5% in 2010-11, about 8.2% in 2012, and 8% in 2013. Exploration success is on the rise in Vietnam, with a growing number of international oil companies partnering with Petrovietnam in finding and developing hydrocarbon resources, particularly gas. BMI is assuming oil and gas liquids production of no more than 390,000 b/d by 2011/12, and the country is expected to produce 390,000 b/d in 2008. Consumption is forecast to increase by 6-10%/year to 2013, implying demand of 447,000 b/d by the end of the forecast period.

Natural gas

Gas demand is forecast to increase to 22 billion cu m (bcm) by 2013, from the 2007 figure of 7.7 bcm, while gas production is expected to rise to 25 bcm in 2018 from 7.7

bcm in 2007. In 2007 the Asia-Pacific region as a whole consumed 421 bcm of gas, and demand of 595 bcm is expected for 2013. Production of 336 bcm in 2007 should increase to 483 bcm in 2013, so net imports of 111 bcm/year will be required in 2012, up from 85 bcm/year in 2007.

BMI notes that Vietnam's share of this gas consumption in 2007 was 1.83%, while its share of production was 2.29%. By 2013, its share of Asia-Pacific gas consumption is forecast to be 3.7%, with the country accounting for 4.55% of the area's supply.

- **Vietnam stock market hits three-year low**

Vietnam's stock market Thursday fell to its lowest level since December 2005, after state media reported that ongoing losses had driven several securities firms to the verge of bankruptcy. The VN-Index ended the day down 2.9 per cent, or 8.3 points, to close at 277.8, the lowest level since December 29, 2005.

Market volume was just 6.8 million shares, valued at 146 billion dong (8.3 million dollars). It was the fourth consecutive drop since trading resumed after Vietnam's lunar New Year.

Anh said only about 10 percent of Vietnamese companies had reported profits in the fourth quarter of last year, and several had reported large losses.

The State Bank of Vietnam cut the prime interest rate from 8.5 to 7 per cent on Sunday, but had little effect on market sentiment. "Many traders thought that when the 300 point psychological support level was breached on Monday, it meant the market would drop further, so they decided to sell stocks in the hope of buying them back cheaper in the future," said Nguyen Thanh Hai, a trader at Saigon Securities Incorporated.

Vietnam's stock market has lost 12 per cent of its value already this year, after dropping by 65 per cent in 2008. It peaked at 1,174 in March 2007.

Social Front

- **China to provide free aid to DPRK**

The government of China has recently decided to offer free aid to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), according to the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA).

In a short report released on Feb. 4, the KCNA said "the aid will be an encouragement to the Korean people in their struggle to accelerate the building of a great prosperous powerful nation". The news came after a visit to the DPRK by the head of the Chinese

- **Hanoi bans poultry transport by bikes to stop bird flu**

Vietnam's capital city Hanoi has banned the use of motorcycles and bicycles to transport live poultry as part of efforts to protect the city from a bird flu outbreak.

Starting this week, all poultry brought into the city must be transported by specialised trucks and be certified bird flu-free by the local animal health department, the city government said in a statement seen on Tuesday.Hanoi has not been hit by the deadly H5N1 virus yet but the agriculture ministry said this week a new bird flu outbreak was discovered in the southernmost province of Ca Mau, where several hundred ducks had tested positive to bird flu.The bans may be difficult to enforce because large parts of Hanoi are rural and motorcycles are the primary means of transportation formns of people in Vietnam.Hanoi has a population of about 6mn.Vietnam has this year confirmed one case of human infection in the northern province of Thanh Hoa, involving an 8-year-old girl who fell sick after eating duck and chicken raised on her family's farm. She recovered.

The H5N1 flu remains largely a virus among birds, but experts fear it could mutate into a form that is easily transmitted by humans and spark a pandemic that could kill millions worldwide.Having resurfaced in Asia in late 2003, the virus has infected 404 people worldwide and killed 254 of them, including 52 in Vietnam, according to the World Health Organization.

• Laos

Political Front

Strategic Front

Economic Front

- **Consultation meeting to address financial crisis in tourism sector held**

A consultation meeting to find ways and measures for improving the services and to attract more tourists to Laos was held on 4 February in Vientiane. The function was chaired by Mr. Soukaseum Bodhisane, Vice Chairman of the Lao National Tourism Administration (LNTA) and was attended by representatives of tour agents, hotels and guesthouses in Vientiane.

During the meeting, the participants has constructive discussed a number of issues relating to the tourist services in order to look for the constrains and to find the ways for addressing them.The meeting has also talked about the improvement of the service fees (tour programs, hotel, restaurant and communication). The meeting also urged the LNTA to urgently try to ensure the enforcement of tourism law and increase tourism promotion.

Social Front

- **Enhancing the capacity of the Lao PDR to participate in the international legal system**

On 5 February 2009 H.E. Mr. Phongsavath Boupha, Vice Minister Ministry of Foreign Affairs, together with Ms. Sonam Yangchen Rana, UN Resident Coordinator / UNDP Resident Representative, signed a Project Document for the International Law Project Phase III.
The International Law Project is an initiative that started in 2002 in partnership between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and UNDP. Its main objective is the enhancement of the active participation and engagement of the Lao PDR in the international legal process, and to be responsive to the needs of the Lao PDR in international law. According to the press release from UNDP Vientiane office, at the signing ceremony in Don Chan Palace, Ms Rana welcomed the adoption of this latest phase of the International Law Project, resulting from the great success of the earlier Project phases and the excellent partnership between the UN and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. She described how, together, the two previous phases of the Project - devoted to assisting the Lao PDR's ratification of international instruments and their translation into Lao and assisting with the implementation and monitoring of international treaties and their reporting requirements - have laid solid foundations in increasing the effective participation of the Lao PDR in the international legal system.

Some of the successes from the UN relationship with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the assistance of the previous phases of this Project have been seen in the increasing strength of participation by the Lao PDR in international instruments. This has been reflected recently in the impressive events to commemorate the 60th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the active role played by the Lao PDR is the negotiation and adoption of the Convention on Cluster Munitions, the ratification of the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights and the signature of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. Phase III of the Project is designed to build on these foundations through developing a comprehensive capacity development for the country to meet the demands of its increasing participation in treaties and in international law generally. While previous phases of the Project have been very successful, the ability of the country to absorb aid and to participate effectively in international law is undermined by lack of adequate capacity.
Within this Project, the development of capacity for the immediate and long term needs of the Lao PDR will include: specialist training for MoFA personnel, in particular in the Department of Treaties and Law and International Organisation; strengthening the capacity of institutions that provide training infrastructure in international law; providing training for the Judiciary, Line Ministries, law enforcement agencies and Civil Society Organisations in monitoring international law application and raising awareness about it in the Lao PDR; and strengthening the capacity of the National Assembly in the adoption and implementation of treaties.

With its specific focus on capacity development, Phase III of the International Law Project will bring direct benefits to many. Over 500 students will benefit through assistance to the law faculties in teaching international law and the Project will assist up to 300 middle ranking officers from MoFA and Line Ministries to acquire specialist knowledge in international law. It will also assist interns to work in the Lao missions in Geneva and New York and enable MoFA senior officials to participate in international treaties conferences and UN Sessions, and 300 judges will directly benefit from training programmes. International law forums organized by the Project will benefit up to 1000 participants, women's organizations will benefit directly from gender specific seminars and workshops, and community awareness programmes conducted through the Project will directly benefit provincial and district authorities.

Throughout the Project there will be active engagement among UN agencies in the Lao PDR in the spirit of the 'One UN' model and the Vientiane Declaration on Aid Effectiveness to ensure that it delivers effective and efficient outcomes. The Project Document was developed through extensive national consultations from national stakeholders and development partners, with a significant part of the budget provided by Finland and the European Commission, both development partners during the first two phases of this Project. This Phase of the Project will last for 4 years and has an estimated budget of USD 3,825,000.

• Cambodia

Political Front

Strategic Front

- **Border talks deadlock, again**

CAMBODIAN and Thai negotiators have again failed to reach an agreement to end a long-running dispute over their shared border, but say new talks will be held in mid-April.

Cambodian negotiator Var Kimhong said Thursday that the Joint Border Commission (JBC) had was in deadlock over what to call the 11th century temple - known in Cambodia as Prasat Preah Vihear - and was unable to devise a way to proceed with border demarcation in contested areas surrounding the temple.

"Preah Vihear belongs to Cambodia with recognition from Unesco and the International Court of Justice," Var Kimhong told reporters at Phnom Penh International Airport after returning Thursday from the talks in Bangkok.

Var Kimhong added that the JBC had agreed in principle that the area surrounding Preah Vihear temple and the nearby pagoda of Keo Sekha Kirisvara be cleared of troops, but that the decision would only be made in a meeting today between the two countries' defence ministers.Talks are set to recommence in Siem Reap in mid-April, and Prime

Minister Hun Sen is expected to raise the issue in bilateral discussions during the forthcoming Asean summit from February 27 to March 1 in Hua Hin, Thailand.

Economic Front

- **Exports offered $1.6m boost**

A US$1.6 million World Bank-funded export promotion program launched Tuesday, offering $30,000 grants to companies looking to tap the international market. The Export Market Access Fund (EMAF) runs for 16 months and is aimed at increasing the value and variety of local exports, say organisers.

"The EMAF is crucial for local entrepreneurs to increase their export capacity to tap global markets," said Kem Sithan, a secretary of state for the Ministry of Commerce.

He said that Cambodian exports are lagging behind regional competitors and that the government is working to encourage the sector. Officials say the economy needs to be diversified beyond tourism, garments, construction and agriculture.

The crisis-hit garment sector is especially worrying for the government. "The garment sector is facing significant risks, and government trade promotions will allow 60 percent of workers to keep their jobs," he said.

Project manager Joshua Morris said that the grants will play an important role in diversifying Cambodia's export base. "The companies have to pay 50 percent of the cost - for example, if the firm wants us to develop a new marketing website to promote their products to Europe."

- **PM lashes out at developed world, donors over crisis**

HUN SEN lambasted Western countries Thursday for the economic crisis, blaming them for corruption and mismanagement at an economic conference in Phnom Penh.

"Rich countries are only blaming poor countries for corruption - they never blame one another," he said at the Third Cambodia Economic Forum at Raffles Le Royal hotel.

Donor organisations were not spared from the attacks, with Hun Sen singling out the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB) for making the crisis worse."Powerful nations no longer have the right to advise small countries," he said. He announced a series of measures to cut wasteful spending and provide additional funding to support the local economy.

Among the cost-cutting measures was a 50 percent cut in fuel spending for government cars in line with lower petroleum prices.He said that cutting government waste would be a key part of the 2009 budget.

Slowdown coming

Development organisations recommended a range of reforms and crisis-fighting measures. World Bank Country Manager Quimiao Fan warned that the slower economic growth in 2008 was "just a warning" before an even sharper downturn for 2009. He pressed for deeper regional integration, better management of natural resources and more infrastructure investment.

"Cambodia should look to neighbouring markets in Asia, where the contraction may be less pronounced," he said. ADB Country Director Arjun Goswami highlighted increased poverty as a side effect of the crisis, saying about two million people in the Kingdom were close to the poverty line.

Hun Sen rejected opposition demands for a $500 million stimulus package. "That request is not logical - it is opposition logic," he said. Opposition lawmakers were barred from the event.UN Development Program Resident Representative Douglas Broderick said Cambodia has achieved remarkable economic growth, but that wealth had not trickled down.

- **PM presses for 6pc growth**

THE government is committed to six percent growth in 2009, despite the economic crisis, Prime Minister Hun Sen said Thursday.

The statement is in stark contrast to reports by outside organisations that growth will fall short of five percent for the year. "Despite the downturn, the [government] will try to maintain six percent growth in 2009," said Hun Sen at the opening of the third Cambodia Economic Forum in Phnom Penh.

He pointed to agriculture, tourism and garments as key sectors.The government's growth estimates have consistently overshot those of independent organisations such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.

A spokesman for the ADB said estimated growth will hover at around 4.7 percent in 2009.Garment exports and tourism are expected to show the sharpest declines on softening US clothing demand and falling global tourism spending.

Social Front

Environmental Front

- **Govt denies mismanaging resources**

CORRUPT ruling elites have monopolised Cambodia's emerging oil and mineral sectors, aided by a "total lack" of transparency and a supine foreign donor community, according to a new report from corruption watchdog Global Witness.

The 70-page "Country for Sale" report, released Thursday, takes aim at the "high-level corruption, nepotism and patronage" infusing the Kingdom's extractive resources sector,

which it claims is dominated by senior government officials.On the basis of investigations conducted in 2008, the report's authors say that concessions for mineral and oil exploration are allocated "behind closed doors" and raise fears revenues from these resources will be mismanaged rather than used for infrastructure development or poverty alleviation.

The report goes on to name dozens of high-ranking military and ruling party officials it said have control over the country's resource revenues."Cambodia today is a country for sale. The small number of elite powerbrokers who run the state have sold off large concessions in a manner that is non-transparent and highly dubious," the report says.

A "total lack of transparency in the ownership of companies ... serves only one purpose - to protect and entrench the interests of those who benefit from the continued functioning of Cambodia's shadow state".

To date, Global Witness claims the government has granted over 100 mining concessions - including 21 in 2008 - to companies controlled by "elite regime figures", with little environmental oversight.

It raises further concerns about the nature of fees paid by firms to secure mineral exploration agreements, following a 2007 comment by Lim Kean Hor, minister of water resources and meteorology, describing a US$2.5 million BHP Billiton-Mitsubishi social development fund as "tea money".

The report also slams the Cambodian National Petroleum Authority - the institution in charge of the Kingdom's infant oil-and-gas industry - as a "constitutionally dubious body" with "no parliamentary oversight", claiming millions in oil exploration fees have failed to show up in national revenue reports since 2006.

Government denials

Minister of Industry, Mines and Energy Suy Sem and officials at the CNPA, including Director General Te Duong Dara and Deputy Director General Men Den, also refused requests for comment Thursday.

But Minister of Information Khieu Kanharith said the government was handling its resource explorations in an open and transparent manner. However, David Lempert, an international development consultant, agreed with the report that the coming windfall of resource profits would paralyse local development.

Spineless donors

Foreign donors - which have pledged nearly $1 billion in aid to Cambodia for 2009 - are also to blame for granting "international legitimacy" to high-level corruption, the report says. Independent analyst Chea Vannath said that countries needed a certain amount of

tolerance for corruption if they wanted to do business in Cambodia, and that rising levels of Chinese aid - rarely accompanied by conditions - discouraged foreign donors from taking a strong stance on corruption.

Global Witness made headlines in June 2007 when its "Family Trees" report - alleging widespread involvement of senior government officials in illegal logging - was banned in Cambodia, with the prime minister's brother, Hun Neng, saying that he would "hit [Global Witness staff] until their heads are broken". The organisation's staff have been barred from the country since 2005.

Senior CPP lawmaker Cheam Yeap said Global Witness had the right to conduct investigations into corruption issues, but warned they would "face lawsuits" if they published inaccurate information about government officials.

He added that there were clear laws relating to the allocation of mineral and oil concessions, and that the government was trying to root out "individual officials at the local level" engaged in corrupt activities."The prime minister has shown a commitment to fight corruption, and he has taken action step by step," he said.

Nichol also expressed hopes the government would shy away from banning the report, as it did in 2007.

- **Migrant worker jobs hit by regional unemployment**

GOVERNMENT and non-state bodies estimate that Cambodian migrant workers will find it increasingly difficult to find employment in the region as demand for overseas workers drops.

Migrant worker job markets Malaysia and South Korea - both popular with Cambodians seeking work overseas - were particularly badly affected, sources said.

Sok Chanpheakdey, director of Philimore Cambodia Co Ltd, a company that sends Cambodians to work in Malaysia, said that the demand for factory workers has dropped between 70 percent to 80 percents this year. Housekeeping jobs - which attract 80 to 100 Cambodian workers to Malaysia every month - were stable, however, he added.

"The Malaysian government has announced a halt to migrant-worker employment for the industrial sector because many people there are facing unemployment, so they are not seeking workers from outside," he said.

Many factories and companies in Malaysia have gone bankrupt, meaning the employment market had become saturated with factory workers and labourers, he said.

Heng Sour, chief of the Administration and Finance for Overseas Manpower Unit, a Ministry of Labour department, said that underemployment had become a problem in

South Korea with employers reducing work hours due to financial problems. Migrant worker numbers were also down. In 2008, Cambodia sent 2,531 workers to South Korea, but Heng Sour said that this number would be expected to drop to 2,000 in 2009.

Ya Navuth, executive director of Coordination of Action Research on AIDS and Mobility, said he was concerned about the impact a decrease in overseas Cambodian manpower would have on domestic unemployment, citing Thailand as another example of a country where the demand for migrant labour had dropped significantly.

The decrease in Cambodian migrants workers will reduce national revenue as remittances from overseas are reduced, Ya Navuth said.

In South Korea, migrant workers can make up to between US$600 to $700 per month, in Malaysia they can get from $120 to $150 per month and in Thailand just $80 to $120 per month. Cambodian migrant workers abroad send back to the Kingdom around $300 million per year.

Ya Navuth called on the government to prepare a job stimulus package to create more jobs or to offer to farmers to increase agricultural capacity. Without such a fund, the livelihoods of the poorest Cambodians would be severely affected, he warned.

Sam Rainsy Party's lawmaker Mu Sochua backed up the call, reiterating her party's request for a $500 million stimulus package, primarily for the Ministry of Labour, to help create more jobs and offer vocational training courses.

Business and Politics in Muslim World

India

Sadia Khanum

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Political front:

Never cleared Kalyan over Babri: Mulayam

Criticism from "secular quarters" seems to be having its effect. SP chief Mulayam Singh Yadav on Monday curbed his hawkish defence of former Hindutva mascot Kalyan Singh by clarifying that he had never absolved him of his role in Babri demolition. Mulayam told reporters that he had been misquoted in an interview that Kalyan had no role in Babri demolition, saying that the former BJP leader owed "moral responsibility" for saving the mosque. Mulayam clarified his stance on alliance with Kalyan, which has invited strong criticism from Muslim leadership and

also the ire of Congress which on Monday asserted that it would not share any political platform with the BJP renegade in the event of a pact with SP, which is in the works. Taken by surprise from the avalanche of criticism, SP is working to neutralise the campaign. SP general secretary Amar Singh is visiting the Deoband seminary on Tuesday to hold talks with the community leadership to clarify reasons for the tie-up. Amar Singh also revived contacts with the Left leadership, meeting CPI leader A B Bardhan and planning to meet CPM boss Prakash Karat. He also called on LJP leader Ramvilas Paswan who has supported SP on the Kalyan issue. Kalyan was the CM of UP at the time of Babri demolition while being a strong proponent of Mandir campaign in early 1990s, a fact which made him a villain in secular camp. AICC general secretary Digvijay Singh refused to comment on the new alliance but said that Congress felt Kalyan was responsible for the demolition and the party would not join him in campaigning if it had a tie-up with SP. The AICC pressure mounted further. Satyavrat Chaturvedi said Congress should not ally with SP as the party had never compromised with "communal forces". "After Kalyan has joined SP, we will not just find it difficult to convince the minorities but also the secular population in general on our stand," he said. Kalyan's exit from BJP seems to have given UP politics a curious turn, as it has emerged as a handle for various quarters to pressure SP. Observers feel the AICC is questioning Mulayam's commitment to "secularism" to extract a better deal in seat-sharing, while minority leaders dropped from elections are using it to pressure the leadership to regain favour. The SP leadership maintains that Kalyan is a changed man since he left BJP and his motive was the same as "minorities" - to decimate the BJP. "If it means joining hands with some more leaders (of saffron brigade), then so be it," said Mulayam. Amar Singh said, "If Valmiki who was an outlaw went on to write Ramayana, why cannot there be a change of heart in Kalyan Singh and he became a champion of secularism."

Chief Election Commissioner Gopalaswami 'recommends' removal of Navin Chawla

In a move guaranteed to stir up institutional and political controversy, chief election commissioner N. Gopalaswami has *suo motu* sent a recommendation to the President that Election Commissioner Navin Chawla should be removed from office on the alleged ground of 'partisanship.' The President has forwarded the CEC's missive to the Prime Minister.Mr. Gopalaswami's action has raised eyebrows within the government on account of its timing as well as its departure from well-settled readings of the relevant constitutional provisions. The 15th general election, along with Assembly elections in some States, will be held in April-May 2009. Mr. Gopalaswami himself will retire as CEC on April 20 and Mr. Chawla will succeed him. The sequence of events is as follows. On March 16, 2006, BJP Leader of the Opposition L.K. Advani and 204 MPs submitted a petition to President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam seeking the removal of Mr. Chawla as Election Commissioner under Article 324(5) of the Constitution. A month later, BJP leader V.K. Malhotra sent a copy of this petition to the CEC. With the President forwarding the petition to the Prime Minister, the matter rested there with the political government

evidently finding no merit in the BJP's allegations. The BJP took the matter to the Supreme Court where its arguments seemed to make no headway. It withdrew the petition in August 2007. In January 2008, the BJP leaders took the matter up with the CEC who curiously received them in his chambers instead of scheduling a formal meeting of the three-member Election Commission to hear them out. Subsequently, Mr. Gopalaswami served a notice on Mr. Chawla and took a whole year to come up with his adverse recommendation. He is known to have rejected as irrelevant the BJP's allegations going back to the Emergency and so forth. He claimed that he based himself on his own experience and observations of Mr. Chawla's work as Election Commissioner. In his affidavit submitted to the Supreme Court, Mr. Gopalaswami departed from precedent to claim that the CEC had *suo motu* power to recommend the removal of an Election Commissioner. He interpreted his predecessor B.B. Tandon's view as being the same as his. Actually, Mr. Tandon's view was shaped by an opinion given by Ashok Desai, former Attorney General, in April 2006. That opinion clearly held that under Article 324(5), which was elaborately interpreted by the Supreme Court in its judgment in T.N. Seshan, Chief Election Commissioner of India v. Union of India (1995), "the CEC cannot act on his own and must await the reference through proper channels to be able to act on a complaint or petition seeking the removal of an EC." The Supreme Court in the Seshan case held that the Article 324(5) proviso for the removal from office of the CEC only through impeachment (as in the case of Supreme Court judges) as well as the proviso that the Election Commissioners shall not be removed except on the recommendation of the CEC ("based on intelligible, and cogent considerations") was designed to protect the independence of the Election Commission as a body from political or executive arbitrariness. The Court specifically held that "if…the power [of recommending removal of an Election Commissioner] were to be exercisable by the CEC as per his whim and caprice, the CEC himself would become an instrument of oppression and would destroy the independence of the ECs…if they are required to function under the threat of the CEC recommending their removal." The well-accepted legal position is that the three-member Election Commission is a constitutional body of co-equals, with equal voting power, and the CEC is the first among equals with certain leadership and administrative responsibilities. Crucially, Election Commissioners, being appointed by the President, that is, the political government, without consultation with the CEC, can be removed only by the President, that is, the political government. (The CEC as well as ECs apply to the President for leave and forward their tour programmes to her.) A necessary constraint on the executive's power is that ECs cannot be removed without the recommendation of the CEC after a formal reference is made by the executive. Mr. Gopalaswami is an able man with a great deal of administrative experience. He is well regarded in the services. But his *suo motu* act of adventurism, coming towards the end of his tenure as CEC, is constitutionally and democratically out of line. The Manmohan Singh's government will no doubt give the CEC's unasked opinion the quietus it deserves. But its effect will be to stir up political controversy over an institution that has done its job of conducting free, fair, and peaceful elections creditably during Mr. Gopalaswami's tenure. The impact on the internal workings of the Election Commission of India can well be imagined.

'Divide and rule' policy will not work: Rahul

All-India Congress Committee general secretary Rahul Gandhi indirectly accused the BJP of following a policy of "divide and rule." Addressing a youth meeting to mark the conclusion of the Gujarat Congress party's month-long "Abhay Udan" (Fearless Flight to the Future) programme, Mr. Gandhi said while the Congress strived for unity among people, its main rivals tried to sow fear and divide them. Without naming the BJP, Mr. Gandhi said the clash of ideologies had always remained dominant in Indian politics and it was not possible for those who advocated the policy of 'divide and rule' to come to power without pitting one section against another on the lines of caste, creed or religion.

UPA will contest as national alliance: Lalu

Railway Minister and RJD chief Lalu Prasad after a meeting with UPA chairperson and Congress president Sonia Gandhi on Friday said the UPA could contest the Lok Sabha election as a national alliance. The instability in Jharkhand also figured during the talks and Mr. Prasad announced that the House would be dissolved and elections called. Mr. Prasad spent about an hour with Ms Gandhi and sought to clarify that the impression that the Congress would not form an alliance at the national level was wrong. "I cross checked with Congress leaders and also took up the matter with Ms. Gandhi today [Friday] and it was conveyed to me that all the allies should and will fight as a united force, that is the UPA." Mr. Prasad said the UPA was a combination of secular forces and would chart a common minimum programme after the election. But they would not contest the election on a common manifesto. Each party would be free to propagate its own programme and policy. Each ally would be free to contest commensurate with its strength in its areas and States of influence, but the UPA constituents would sit and decide the issue of seat sharing. Mr. Prasad said the call would be taken only after the results and it was quite possible that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh might continue. He, however, said that even that decision would be taken only after the results and if the UPA was returned to power. As for Jharkhand, he said the prospect of putting a new government there appeared bleak and the only solution was to dissolve the Assembly and order fresh elections. As for the hike in freight charges of fertilizers, food grains, flour and pulses, Mr. Prasad turned down the demand for a roll back, maintaining that it did not impact the consumer at all.

Muslims not angry with SP: Shivpal

Blaming opposition for spreading rumours about Muslims being angry with SP, Shivpal Singh Yadav said that in fact Muslims are happy that BJP interest will be badly hurt with former chief minister Kalyan Singh joining SP. Shivpal Singh Yadav, state president of Samajwadi Party was in city on Sunday also brushed apart the reports that senior SP leader Azam Khan is disgruntled with party high command and has got positive feelers from SP. He said, Azam Khan is very well intact with the party.

BSP to field more Muslim candidates in Lok Sabha polls

With the renewed friendship between SP and Kalyan Singh not going down well with a section of Muslims, the ruling BSP has decided to cash in on the situation and field at least 25% candidates from the minority community in the forthcoming Lok Sabha polls. At a recent meeting of senior

party leaders, it was decided to increase the number of Muslim candidates, especially in the light of political equations emerging after Kalyan's pact with Mulayam, a senior BSP leader claimed. As per the plan, the party is contemplating to change its candidates in 5-10% seats, sources said, adding senior party leader and cabinet minister Naseemuddin Siddiqui had been entrusted with the task of mobilising the community leaders in the BSP's favour. The leader said that the idea is to field at least 25% Muslim candidates at 20 places out of 80 Lok Sabha seats in Uttar Pradesh. They said that party supremo Mayawati is of the view that Mulayam's bonhomie with Kalyan would "dent" its traditional vote bank. Besides, the BSP expects differences between SP and Congress, who were discussing a possible coalition before Kalyan episode, would also crop up. Earlier, the party announced Muslim candidates on nearly 18 seats, however, couple of them like Kazim Ali aka Naved Miyan, who is son of senior Congress leader and former MP Noorbano, were replaced later on. Muslim candidates on 15-16 seats are almost final and talks with prominent leaders in remaining four-five seats is in the final stages, sources claimed, adding the selection process was likely to be wrapped up in the next couple of days.

Mumbai Attacks and Aftermath:

Pakistan weighs response to Indian dossier

With reports swirling around of Pakistani investigators claiming the Mumbai conspiracy was hatched in a third country, Pakistan's Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani on Friday repudiated comments made by his envoy in London that the terrorist attacks were not planned from the territory of Pakistan. "How can he comment? We can't right now," Mr. Gilani said in Davos when asked by NDTV about the statement of High Commissioner Wajid Shamsul Hasan that the Indian evidence could be fabricated. "If the PM cannot comment, then how can he? It is only the job of the Interior Ministry," the Pakistani Prime Minister added. Pakistan is expected to formally communicate the results of its initial investigations into the Mumbai attacks next week. But Mr. Hasan's comments and the sharp response by Prime Minister Gilani – appear to be an indication of the uncertainty within the Pakistani establishment over how best to respond to the dossier India handed over earlier this month. At the time, senior Indian officials had indicated that the same amount of information was shared with Pakistan as had been provided to all countries other than the 15 whose nationals had been killed in the Mumbai attacks. But *The Hindu* has now learned that Islamabad was actually provided a compressed, third version consisting of 13 pages with a two-page covering note. In contrast, other countries received 54 pages of evidentiary material and another 15 pages – irrelevant from the point of view of investigation drawn from a background PowerPoint presentation on India-Pakistan relations. Though the Pakistani edition of the dossier contains a crisp summation of all information the Indian side considers "actionable" (and some additional public domain material such as the mug shots of the nine deceased terrorists), the "optics" of being handed over a file that was much thinner than what had been shared with the whole world generated some disquiet in Islamabad. Several senior Delhi-based European diplomats also conveyed to *The Hindu* this week their belief that India erred in being so niggardly with Pakistan, especially when the dossier was being distributed so widely. Pakistan privately asked India why other countries had been provided a more detailed dossier but decided at the highest level not to make this an issue. In turn, the fact that Islamabad didn't publicly protest or say that it had been given insufficient information was seen by the Indian side as a positive sign. Indian officials justify their decision by noting there was little point in giving Islamabad photographic evidence of Pakistani food and clothing items recovered from the Kuber, the boat the terrorists used for a part of their journey to Mumbai, or pictures of the phones used, or the background material on bilateral relations. "Anything that would be of value to a serious

investigation like the telephone trail was given to them," an official told *The Hindu*. And yet, the dossier handed over to the Pakistani side contained curious omissions. For example, the logbook maintained by the Kuber, which was included in the full dossier, was not shared with Islamabad, even though diligent investigators might be able to ferret out clues from the handwriting and use of language. Nor were the elaborate navigation coordinates recovered from the GPS handset. The Urdu logbook, for example, mis-spells the Hindi word 'marg' as 'mrg' (Persian for 'death') by omitting the necessary vowel, alif, between the consonants 'meem' and 'ray' in its list of Mumbai streets, a common mistake made by Urdu speakers unfamiliar with Hindi pronunciation. The Hindi transliteration of the logbook done by the Indian side also contains mistakes the Urdu word 'sev-aiy-aan' (vermicelli) has been rendered 'sooiyan' (needles), perhaps because the Urdu spelling used on the Indian side for vermicelli is the less-Punjabised 'seviyaan'. Both these points would strengthen Indian claims that the terrorists were indeed from Pakistani Punjab. But New Delhi chose not to press these. The abbreviated dossier also omits information like the fake name, 'Kharak Singh,' used by the terrorists to open the VoIP phone account with Callphonex, and the names of the 'Pakistan-based handlers' India says were in touch with the terrorists. Terming such details as irrelevant from the investigative standpoint, Indian officials say how Pakistan responds to the limited information given will determine not just the next steps in the Mumbai investigation but also the next steps in the bilateral relationship. New Delhi is bracing itself for the news that some of the leads have turned cold. But the hope here is that Islamabad will see wisdom in meeting the legitimate expectations of India that the Pakistani links of the Mumbai attackers are thoroughly probed.

India will not press for U.N. sanctions

Describing Islamabad's approach to the Mumbai attacks as the "Dance of the Seven Veils," India on Friday ruled out approaching the United Nations Security Council for sanctions on Pakistan as that would only affect the common people. On the U.N. route, the sources said India was preparing a list of Pakistan-based individuals and entities involved in terror attacks and trying to get them banned. The list could include Jaish-e-Mohammad chief Masood Azhar and others behind the planning and execution of a series of attacks in Indian cities since 2006. On approaching the Security Council, the sources said India's experience since 1947 "leads us to believe that its deliberations and decisions have nothing to do with justice. It is a pure political choice… it is a deal around the table." The sources cited instances of India being let down at the Security Council on the Kashmir issue, then on U.N. intervention in Korea and finally in the Bangladesh war. "In each case, the UNSC decision had little to do with the merits of the case. There is nothing in our experience to suggest that this is the right thing to do."

Pak probe turns up Bangla link in 26/11: Report

Pakistani investigators probing the Mumbai terror attacks have found evidence of a Bangladeshi connection, a media report said. The report on the probe, which is expected to be shared soon with India, is likely to indicate that the attacks were carried out by "an international network of Muslim fundamentalists present in South Asia and spread all the way to the Middle East", the Dawn newspaper said in a report. Pakistani sleuths were "closing in on a Bangladeshi connection" to the attacks and had evidence of the involvement of the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami. There were also "clear indications that some of the planning for the attacks was done in Dubai and there is also an element of local Indian support", the Dawn said. Investigators have also suggested that the attacks might be "remotely linked to Al Qaida's international network", the

Dawn said. On the other hand, Indian foreign secretary, Mr Shivshankar Menon, said in Paris the organisers of the Mumbai carnage were “clients and creations” of the ISI, adding that Islamabad remains evasive despite being provided evidence. An external affairs ministry spokesman, speaking in New Delhi, also slammed Pakistan for allowing a congregation of banned terror outfits to take place in PoK yesterday, saying it amounted to giving a “license” to them to operate. Further, after two Indian journalists were roughed up and their belongings confiscated by suspected ISI agents in Lahore today, the external affairs ministry has re-emphasised its month-old advisory that Pakistan is not safe for travel.

Terror: Pak told to be sincere

India once again termed Pakistan the “epicentre” of global terrorism and urged it to act with “sincerity and decisiveness” against the perpetrators of the Mumbai carnage, on a day when Pakistan's High Commissioner to India Mr Shahid Malik returned to Islamabad for consultations to finalise the country's response to the Indian dossier on the Mumbai attacks, which is expected to be handed over this week. India submitted a detailed dossier to Pakistan on 5 January pointing to the involvement of elements from its country in the Mumbai attacks. Pakistan insisted that its agencies were not involved in the carnage and the terror strikes were plotted outside its territory. “We have been saying that Pakistan government is not involved in this (Mumbai attacks). We have also been saying that this (plot) was not put together in Pakistan,” minister of state for interior, Mr Tasnim Ahmad Qureshi, told reporters. “Pakistan has become the epicentre of international terrorism,” defence minister Mr AK Antony declared while inaugurating the 11th Asian Security Conference at the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) here. Noting that the positive gains of the past few years had been “destroyed” by the “dastardly” Mumbai attack, the minister said: “That major attacks of large magnitude can be planned and executed by elements in Pakistan totally undermines the solemn commitments to us made by its leadership that territory in its control would not be permitted to be used for terrorism.” Thus, Mr Antony maintained, the onus was now on Pakistan “to act with sincerity and decisiveness against the perpetrators and controllers of such attacks”. “It is in the interest of this region and the rest of the world that such perpetrators of wanton violence are brought to justice and the infrastructure of terror is eliminated,” Mr Antony said. The world community too had a role to play since the “Frankenstein” of terrorism had become a threat to democracy, stability and peace in Afghanistan and to Pakistan itself, Mr Antony said.

Mumbai attackers 'creations of ISI': Menon

India on Thursday again came down heavily on Pakistan for the Mumbai attacks and the Indian embassy bombing in Kabul saying that the perpetrators of these attacks were "clients and creations" of ISI. In a speech at French Institute of Foreign Relations, Paris, foreign secretary Shivshankar Menon said arms sale to Pakistan unrelated to the fight against terrorism would make consolidation of democracy even more difficult in Pakistan. "Among global issues, international terrorism remains a major threat to peace and stability. We in India are next to the epicenter of international terrorism in Pakistan. We have directly suffered the consequences of linkages and relationships among terrorist organisations, their support structures, official sponsors and funding mechanisms, which transcend national borders but operate within them,"

said Menon. "For India, the most graphic recent instances were the bombing of our embassy in Kabul on July 7, 2008 and the Mumbai attacks of November 26, 2008. In each case, the perpetrators planned, trained and launched their attacks from Pakistan, and the organisers were and remain clients and creations of the ISI. Two months after the Mumbai attacks, and one month after we presented a dossier of evidence linking the attacks to elements in Pakistan, we still await a response from the Pakistani authorities, and prevarication continues," he added. Saying that ceasefire violations, cross-border infiltration and terrorist attacks from Pakistan unfortunately came after a sustained effort by both the countries to improve relations, Menon called upon the international community to help improve the situation. "Given the fragile and unfinished nature of the polity beside us, there is much that the international community can do to help. For instance, arms sales to Pakistan totally unrelated to the fight against terrorism or extremism are like whisky to an alcoholic, a drug reinforcing an addiction, skewing the internal political balance, and making the consolidation of democracy more difficult," said Menon.

Domestic Situation:

Naxals kill 15 policemen

A group of naxals killed 15 policemen, including a young police sub-inspector, in an encounter in Markegaon in Gadchiroli district on Sunday, police said.

Fighting naxals a long and hard struggle: Chidambaram

Union Home Minister P. Chidambaram on Saturday described the fight against naxalism as a "long and hard struggle" and said the challenge was not yet over. "There is no place for Left-wing extremism in a democracy. Any militant who surrenders will be rehabilitated as per the government policy," he told journalists here after an extensive review of the security scenario in Jharkhand with Governor Syed Sibtey Razi and other senior officials. Referring to the common strategy evolved at a recent meeting with Chief Ministers of the affected States to eliminate naxalism, Mr. Chidambaram said joint operations were being carried out by the police forces of various States, except West Bengal where the government did not believe in the policy of "hot pursuit." The West Bengal government does not allow the Jharkhand police to enter its territory nor does its police force enter other States. "I have spoken to the Chief Minister and we will work it out," Mr. Chidambaram said, adding that Orissa, Jharkhand and Bihar were carrying out joint operations. The Minister said 2007-08 witnessed a rise in naxal extremism. However, there was a significant shift in 2008 as the security forces gained an upper hand. Mr. Chidambaram said the Centre fully supported the strategy of the Jharkhand government in combating naxalism. He directed the State administration to immediately fill all vacant posts in the naxal-affected areas to ensure that the civil administration was visible. "Importantly, the tenure of the senior officials should be fixed for at least 2 years, preferably for 3 years." The Minister said all 25 blocks without a police station should have police stations by the end of the year and the target of recruiting 6,000 constables had to be achieved. One India Reserve Battalion, one ex-service men battalion and 10 more battalions of the Jharkhand Jaguar Group had to be raised by the end of the year. "Once the sanctioned additional 1,700 vacancies were filled up, it would considerably

strengthen the police force and help in checking the naxal menace with the ultimate aim of defeating it," Mr. Chidambaram said. Ruling out a national policy on surrender and rehabilitation of militants, he said such policies were made keeping in mind the ground situations of each State.

Economic Front:

Sensex sheds 357 points

Weak economic data and prospects of rising bad loans affected investor sentiment on Monday as the BSE sensex closed at 9,067, down 357 points, its biggest single-session loss in four weeks. Weak Asian market also affected sentiment with banking and real estate stocks leading the slide. At the end of the session, investors were poorer by Rs 87,000 crore with BSE's market capitalization now at Rs 28.7 lakh crore. Banking stocks fell on fears that tough economic conditions could lead to more bad loans for banks, while real estate stocks slid after sectors majors DLF and Unitech showed drastic fall in profits, announced during the weekend. Market players said with the sensex closing near day's low, there could be renewed selling on Tuesday morning. Among the sensex stocks, Jaiprakash Associates ended 13.7% lower at Rs 65.80 while DLF ended 13.5% off at Rs 153.20. Unitech, a non-sensex stock, ended 9% at Rs 29.25. Among the financial sector stocks, ICICI Bank ended 7.5% off at Rs 385 while housing major HDFC finished 7.4% down at Rs 1,423. Reliance Infra was also among the top losers, closing 10.5% lower at Rs 521. The company, over the weekend, had announced a major restructuring within its fold transferring various companies to various divisions in a cash-less transaction. Monday's market also witnessed selling by both, domestic as well as foreign funds. While FIIs net sold stocks worth Rs 126 crore, the corresponding figure for domestic institutions was Rs 161 crore. On the BSE, laggards outnumbered winners by a substantial margin with 1,577 stocks ending in the red compared to 867 advances. Turnover, at Rs 3,026 crore, was lower than last month's average daily figure of Rs 3,525 crore.

Inflation at 5.07 per cent

After two weeks of moderate rise, inflation fell to 5.07 per cent for the week ending 24 January from 5.64 per cent the previous week, due largely to falling prices of fruit and vegetables and certain manufactured items. The positive development is expected to give some more elbow room for RBI to go in for further cut in policy rates. Inflation was at 4.78 per cent during the corresponding week last year. Another factor for the fall is softening prices of items like coffee and khandsari and metals like iron and aluminum.

'India can be rid of poverty by 2015'

Asserting that the UPA government's flagship scheme NREGA has changed the face of rural India by providing employment to the poor and vulnerable sections, the Union rural development minister, Dr Raghuvanash Prasad Singh, said it would achieve its target of total poverty eradication by 2015. "Major strides have been made in this regard due to the various schemes run by the UPA government, especially the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA)," Mr Singh told the Editors' Conference on Social Issues. On account of the NREGA, which provides for 100 days of legally guaranteed employment to people willing to take up public works, the minister said the per capita income has doubled in just three years. "There had been many Rozgar schemes before, yielding a maximum of 60 to 70 crores mandays, but the NREGA has legally guaranteed people their right to work, and resulted in over 1.43 crore mandays," he added. The scheme now being implemented in all the 615 rural districts, has benefited about 3.5 crore rural households in current financial year and generated 1.38 billion persons day up to December 2008.

Exports may fall 22% in January

The global economic crisis is feared to pull down merchandise exports by 22 per cent in January, Union commerce secretary, Mr GK Pillai, said. "Our exports in dollars terms are expected to decline further by 22 per cent", he told an export awards function here. His comments virtually mean that the country's export target of $200 billion for the current financial year would not be met. The government now expects that exports during this fiscal will reach around $170 billion. Exports have been falling since October. They may grow no more than five per cent as some key economies in North America and Europe are facing either a recession or a major slowdown, according to ministry sources. India's merchandise exports registered a decline in December for the third straight month in dollar terms and were valued at $12.690 billion, down 1.1 per cent over $12.825 billion achieved during the same month of the previous fiscal.

15 lakh job loss

With global downturn taking its toll on India, about 15 lakh people employed in the exporting sector would be out of jobs by March this year, commerce secretary Mr GK Pillai said.

Ambanis up on Forbes' list, Mittal slips

They have lost more than $13 billion from their combined wealth, but still the two Ambani brothers have moved higher on the Forbes' latest list of the world's 10 richest CEOs, while Mr Sunil Mittal has joined the league and Mr Lakshmi Mittal slipped two places. Legendary American investor Mr Warren Buffett has retained his top position on the annual list, but Indian-born steel tycoon Mr Lakshmi Mittal has been toppled from his last year's second position by software major Oracle chief Mr Larry Ellison. Mr Mittal has moved down to the fourth position, while Mr Mukesh Ambani, the elder of the two warring brothers, has jumped three positions to grab third rank this year. The younger Mr Anil Ambani has also moved up one place to sixth rank on this year's 'Forbes' list of 10 wealthiest CEOs'. While another Indian business chief, Mr Azim Premji, has moved out of the top-10 list, compatriot Mr Sunil Mittal of Bharti Airtel has joined the league at the ninth position. IT major Wipro chairman, Mr Premji was ranked ninth on the previous year's list. The total number of Indians on the list has remained unchanged at four on this year's list. “Being a CEO isn't what it used to be. Crackdowns on corporate frills like private jets and over-the-top offices have become the norm, taking some of the fun but none of the stress out of running billion-dollar businesses,” Forbes said.

“While some chief executives' jobs may be in peril, these 10 have stuck it out long enough to partake in what's left of the global economy. These have made our annual list of the world's wealthiest CEOs,” it added. About India's presence on the list, Forbes said there are four Indians on its list this year: “two industrialists, Mr Mukesh Ambani and Mr Lakshmi Mittal; and two telecom tycoons, Mr Anil Ambani and Mr Sunil Mittal.” “(The) Ambani brothers owe their hefty fortunes, in part, to inheritance. Following their father's death in 2002, they took over his industrial empire and attempted to run it together. “The collaboration soon soured. After coming to blows over who ran the company, the two reached a bitter compromise, deciding that they and the company would best be served by spinning off and divvying up its various businesses.

“Today Mukesh runs petrochemicals giant Reliance Industries Ltd, while Anil oversees an array of companies including Reliance Communications, a phone and Internet outfit with 60 million customers,” it added. The magazine said that its list of the world's wealthiest CEOs was based on analysis of their financial stakes in firms controlled by them, as on January 23. Mr Buffett has been ranked first with $35.9 billion worth of shareholding, it said, adding that “there are not many people who can lose $25 billion in four months and still top the list of the world's wealthiest CEOs.” Oracle's Mr Ellison has been ranked second with $19.7 billion, followed by Mr Mukesh Ambani ($16.8 billion), Mr Lakshmi Mittal ($13.2 billion), luxury goods major LVMH's Mr Bernard Arnault ($12.2 billion), Mr Anil Ambani ($9 billion), Arabian bank Mashreq's Mr Abdul Aziz Al Ghurair ($7 billion), and Microsoft's Mr Steve Ballmer ($7 billion). Mr Sunil Mittal ($6.9 billion) and Japanese fashion retail major Fast Retailing's Mr Tadashi Yanai ($6 billion) follow.

China may contest toy import ban: Report

China is likely to drag India to the World Trade Organisation challenging the ban by New Delhi on Chinese toys, a media report said. “The Chinese government is mulling a response to India's recent ban on Chinese toy imports and will probably ask the World Trade Organisation to investigate whether the ban violates WTO laws,” the China Daily said quoting an anonymous source close to the development. India had banned import of Chinese toys on 23 January for six months. While the Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT) in the commerce ministry did not cite any reason for the ban, officials said the prohibition was necessary to protect kids from toxic hazards that may be associated with Chinese toys. However, it is perceived here that the ban by New Delhi was aimed at providing protection to the domestic industry from the Chinese manufacturers which claimed at least half of the Rs 2,500 crore Indian toy market. “It is a sign that China will be leveraging WTO rules to help protect its manufacturers from illegal trade barriers and punitive measures by its trading partners at a time when protectionism is growing amid the global economic recession,” the newspaper said. “The ban cannot hold water. The Indian side is doomed to lose in the court if the Chinese government appeals to the WTO Dispute Settlement Body,” it quoted Mr Fu Donghui, managing director of Allbright Law Firm, Beijing.

Geo-strategic developments:

India signs safeguards pact with IAEA

India on Monday signed a key safeguards agreement with IAEA to allow inspection of additional civilian reactors, clearing the decks for supply of atomic fuel and technology by the international community after a 34-year-old nuke trade embargo was lifted last year. The pact between the government of India and the UN atomic watchdog for the 'Application of Safeguards to Civilian Nuclear Facilities' was inked here by IAEA Director General Mohamed ElBaradei and Indian Amabassador Saurabh Kumar. India currently applies inspection by the IAEA in six civilian nuclear reactors under safeguards agreements concluded between 1971 and 1994. In future, additional reactors are expected to be brought under IAEA safeguards under the newly-signed agreement. "The safeguards agreement, which is the result of several rounds of consultations conducted between India and the IAEA since November 2007, was approved by the IAEA Board of Governors in August 2008," the IAEA said in a statement. The agreement will enter into force once it was ratified by India, it said. The India-specific safeguards agreement (ISSA) was approved by the 35-member IAEA Board on August 1 last year. With this, India can go ahead with its nuclear commerce with the Nuclear Suppliers Group. Also, those countries which have signed civil nuclear agreements with India can now proceed with their ratification process in their respective countries, Department of Atomic Energy sources said. The agreement with the

IAEA was a pre-condition for the implementation of the Indo-US civil nuclear deal and allows the 45-member NSG to supply material and technology for India's ambitious nuclear power programme. According to Chairman and Managing Director of Nuclear Power Corporation, S K Jain, this is one step forward towards the agreed framework in implementing the deal on international nuclear commerce. Jain said, "We are happy that we have achieved another milestone in the journey of nuclear power commerce." The ISSA will allow operationalisation of inter-governmental agreements (with Russia, US and France). Now it has to get a cabinet nod and then go for ratification. Atomic Energy Commission member M R Srinivasan said this was a "crucial step" as per the plan of action under the civil nuclear cooperation with the US. Importing of natural uranium immediately would be possible for fuel-starved nuclear indigenous reactors once it is ratified, he said. India has already signed a contract with the French power company AREVA for importing 300 tonnes of yellow cake (natural uranium).

India lags behind Pakistan in missiles

With active help from China and North Korea, Pakistan has surged well ahead of India in the missile arena. The only nuclear-capable ballistic missile in India's arsenal which can be said to be 100% operational as of now is the short-range Prithvi missile. Though the 700-km Agni-I and 2,000-km-plus Agni-II ballistic missiles are being "inducted" into the armed forces, it will take "some time" for them to become "fully-operational in the numbers required". Defence sources said the armed forces were still in the process of undertaking the "training trials" of Agni-I and Agni-II to give them the requisite capabilities to fire them on their own. Of the two, the progress report of Agni-I, tested for the first time in January 2002 to plug the operational gap between Prithvi (150-350 km) and Agni-II missiles, is much better. The Army has already conducted two "user training trials", one in October 2007 and other in March 2008, of the Pakistan-specific Agni-I missile. The fourth test of 3,500-km Agni-III, which will give India the strategic capability to hit targets deep inside China, is also on the anvil now. But Agni-III, tested successfully only twice in April 2007 and May 2008, will not be ready for induction before 2012. Then, of course, design work on India's most ambitious strategic missile with near ICBM (intercontinental ballistic missile) capabilities, the 5,000-km range Agni-V, which incorporates a third composite stage in the two-stage Agni-III, is also in progress. "We should be ready to test Agni-V by 2010-2011," said an official. So, in effect, the missile report card is rather dismal at present. "Unlike Pakistan, our programme is indigenous. But a strategic missile needs to be tested 10 to 15 times, over a variety of flight envelopes and targets, before it can be said to be fully-operational. A missile cannot be dubbed ready just after three to four tests," said an expert. Keeping this benchmark in mind, only Prithvi can be dubbed to be fully ready. Defence PSUs like Bharat Dynamics Ltd, Bharat Earth Movers Ltd and Mishra Dhatu Nigam Ltd, in fact, are stepping up production of the different Prithvi variants. Army, for instance, has orders worth Rs 1,500 crore for 75 Prithvi-I and 62 Prithvi-II missiles, while IAF has gone in for 63 Prithvi-II missiles for over Rs 900 crore. Navy, in turn, has ordered Dhanush missiles, the naval version of Prithvi, with a 350 km strike range, for its "dual-tasked" warships, INS Subhadra and INS Suvarna. India wants to gatecrash into the very exclusive club of `Big-Five' countries like Russia, US and China, which have both ICBMs

(missiles with strike ranges over 5,500-km) and SLBMs (submarine-launched ballistic missiles), before 2015. The SLBM quest is specifically crucial since it's the most effective and secure leg of the "nuclear weapon triad", with land-based missiles and aircraft capable of delivering nuclear bombs constituting the first two components. The initial range of K-15 SLBM being developed by DRDO will, however, be limited to 750-km, far less than the over 5,000-km range SLBMs brandished by the `Big-5' countries. The plan is to go for higher strike ranges after the initial K-15 missiles are integrated into the indigenous nuclear-powered submarines being built under the secretive ATV (advanced technology vessel) programme.

India ready for war? Forces grapple with delays, red tape

For all its aspirations about becoming a superpower, India continues to fumble in formulating strategic plans to systematically build the country's military "capabilities" in tune with its geopolitical objectives. For one, the government is yet to finalise the 11th Defence Plan (2007-2012) due to wrangling between the finance and defence ministries. For another, similar is the fate of the much-touted LTIPP-2007-2022 (long-term integrated perspective plan) till now, say sources. "Successive governments have failed to formulate budgetary plans with a concrete strategic underpinning," said a top official. India does spend a lot on arms deals but it happens in a haphazard manner, without clear prioritisation, and is dogged by huge delays. India's defence expenditure, of course, has also fallen below 2% of its GDP for the first time in decades this fiscal despite military experts demanding at least 3%. Even as UPA government now belatedly fast-tracks procurement of military hardware and software in wake of 26/11, here's a look at some of the gaps in military capabilities:

Nuclear Deterrence: India has Agni missiles as well as fighters to deliver nukes but no nuclear-powered submarines armed with nuclear-tipped missiles. The "nuclear triad" is still some four years away from completion, with the 25-year-old indigenous programme to build nuclear subs under the ATV (advanced technology vessel) project yet to come to fruition. **Submarines:** To China's 57 attack submarines and submarine-launched ballistic missiles, India has just 16 aging diesel-electric submarines, with huge serviceability problems. Only half of Navy's 10 Russian Kilo-class, four German HDW and two virtually-obsolete Foxtrot submarines are operationally available. The Rs 18,798-crore Scorpene project will deliver six submarines only between 2012 and 2017. Pakistan, meanwhile, is building its submarine arm, inducting three French Agosta-90B vessels.

Fighters: Airpower may be decisive during wars but IAF continues to grapple with a free-fall in its fighter squadrons, down to 32 from its sanctioned strength of 39.5. Though 44 squadrons are needed to meet "a full conflict" with Pakistan, while maintaining "a dissuasive posture" against China, IAF will reach the 39.5 mark only by 2017. Delays in both the indigenous Tejas Light Combat Aircraft as well as the procurement process for 126 new multi-role combat fighters in the $10.4 billion project has led to this situation.

Artillery: The Bofors ghost has derailed Army's artillery modernisation plan, valued to be well over Rs 15,000 crore. There has been no induction of big guns since the 1986 procurement of 410 Bofors 155mm/39-calibre howitzers. Army wants to induct 400 155mm/52-calibre towed guns, with another 1,100 of them to be manufactured indigenously, in a Rs 8,000-crore project; 180 wheeled self-propelled howitzers for around Rs 4,700 crore; 140 air-mobile ultra-light howitzers for around Rs 2,900 crore.

Night-Fighting: Army, in particular, requires a strong dose of third-generation thermal imaging sights and night-vision devices. It wants to equip all its tanks, which include 1,200 T-72 tanks, with solid NF capabilities by around 2010-2011.

Aircrasft Carriers: Navy has long demanded three carriers but it does not have even one operating at present since the ageing 28,000-tonne INS Viraat is currently undergoing another life-extension refit to ensure it can run for five more years.

India, France ink reactor pact

India signed its first commercial pact to build atomic power plants with French company Areva after a 34-year-old international embargo on nuclear trade was lifted. Areva will supply two European Pressurised Reactors of 1650 MW each for nuclear plants the French company will build at Jaitapur in Maharashtra. A Memorandum of Understanding in this regard was signed between representatives of the Nuclear Power Corporation of India and Areva in the presence of visiting French minister of state for foreign trade, Ms Anne Marie Idrac, here.The signing of the MoU signals end of India's nuclear isolation and its emergence as a responsible nuclear state, Mr Prithviraj Chavan, MoS in the PMO, said.

India denies Chinese reports on submarines

India refuted a report that Indian Navy submarines were tracking Chinese warships in the waters off Somalia in the Gulf of Aden where these warships had been sent to fight piracy. “There was no such tracking and none of our submarines surfaced in the Gulf on the day that the Chinese media reported that there had been a standoff between the Indian submarine and the Chinese warship. If India had wanted, it could have tracked these warships from the Straits of Malacca and not necessarily in the Gulf as stated in the media reports,” highly placed defence ministry sources said. In the first reported military standoff between the two countries since the 1962 Sino-Indian border conflict, the Chinese media said Chinese destroyers had picked up an unidentified submarine on their sonar. “The Chinese navy soon identified it as a 70-metre long vessel armed with 20 torpedoes. Although the report did not directly specify the model, it provided a file photo of a Kilo-class submarine belonging to the Indian navy, which fit the description,” the report said. Defence ministry sources said that “one cannot merely reach such conclusions and when no submarine had surfaced in the area referred to in the report, one cannot just infer as to what class the submarine belonged and to which country.” The Chinese newspaper said the incident took place on 15 January but India said no Indian submarine had

surfaced in the area. It added that deployment patterns too were not discussed. The report said the two destroyers China sent to Somalia are among its most advanced warships. One of the destroyers, Haikou, was commissioned in 2005. In 2006, a Chinese submarine was detected stalking the US aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk near the Japanese island of Okinawa. The Chinese submarine eventually surfaced close to the US battle group.

Kashmir:

Soz, Azad set to win Rajya Sabha election

Union Minister for Water Resources Saifuddin Soz and the former Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister, Ghulam Nabi Azad, are all set to be declared elected to the Rajya Sabha as no other candidate has filed nomination for these seats. However, for the other two seats, the former Chief Minister, Farooq Abdullah, and three others are in the fray. Professor Soz and Mr. Azad filed their nominations for two seats in Jammu on Tuesday for which notifications were issued separately. Assembly Secretary Mohammad Ramzan told *The Hindu* that no other candidate filed nomination for these seats. Though both the Congress leaders will be elected unopposed, the results will be officially declared only on February 6 when the scrutiny of nominations will take place. Tuesday was the last day of filing nomination for four vacant seats of the upper House. While Professor Soz's term as Rajya Sabha member expired in November last, Mr. Azad was recently elected to the State Assembly from Bhaderwah. For other two seats, Dr. Abdullah and National Conference senior leader Mohammad Shafi filed the nominations. An Independent A.V. Gupta, backed by the Bharatiya Janata Party, also filed the papers. Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah and Union Minister Prithvi Raj Chavan, were among those present.

Social front:

Pub culture drives youth to drinking: Anbumani

Union Health and Family Welfare Minister Anbumani Ramadoss on Friday criticised the "pub culture," saying it resulted in young men and women taking to drinking. Addressing a press conference here after a meeting of the Central Council of Health and Family Welfare, Dr. Ramadoss said he condemned the January 24 attack on women in a Mangalore pub, but favoured an end to the pub culture and raves.The Minister said the National Policy on Alcohol, to be introduced in the next 3-6 months, would limit the number of days for liquor shops to remain open, fix hours and specify the age for drinking. "Though we have not envisaged the final details of the policy, it would be directed at youth." The Minister said 40 per cent of the road accidents in the country were caused by drunken driving by young men women, who jeopardised not only their own lives but also of others. A number of people who lost their lives in these accidents were in their 20s, the most productive period of life. The council passed a resolution making it mandatory for all doctors to serve in rural areas for at least one year after completing their bachelor's degree and before going in for postgraduation. The primary aim of the council is to review the implementation of the government's policies and programmes in the medical and public health sectors and to recommend ways for better implementation.

Warmest January in 19 years

If you didn't feel the chill in January, here's why. The minimum and maximum temperatures were above normal in many parts of the country. Accordingly to the Indian Meteorological Department report released during the second half of January, both minimum and maximum temperatures were considerably above normal on many days. During the last ten days of January maximum temperatures were recorded as high as 13 degree Celsius above normal. In 13 IMD stations, temperatures were recorded above the normal by 5 degree Celsius or more. Mean maximum temperatures of the month were above normal by 2 degree Celsius or more over Chhattisgarh, southMadhya Pradesh, Vidarbha, Marathwada, northAndhra Pradesh, Himachal Pr adesh, Manipur & Nagaland and parts of Jammu & Kashmir, Jharkhand, Konkan, Goa and Orissa.

Criminal justice system has collapsed: SC

Supreme Court on Thursday sounded the grim warning that the criminal justice system had been subverted, with witnesses being manipulated and trials being hijacked with judges and lawyers remaining "handicapped witnesses". Making the chilling observation, which too many only confirmed the widely held perception of the erosion of the system, a Bench comprising Justices B N Agrawal, G S Singhvi and Aftab Alam also said that the lower judiciary had decayed. "The courts of magistrate and munsif have ceased to be an option for the common man," the Bench said and compared the lower courts to ill-equipped and ill-staffed public health centres (PHCs) in rural areas. "Only those people go there who have no other option," said the Bench as an apparent indicator of the low measure of public faith in these courts, which are the first points of dispute settlement for the masses. The comment, perhaps the sharpest-ever from the apex court on the health of the country's judicial administration system, came in a case arising from the appeal filed by two senior advocates R K Anand and I U Khan against Delhi High Court's order hauling them up for criminal contempt for influencing a key witness in a hit-and-run case.

Foreign Relations:

Onus now on LTTE: India

With Sri Lanka announcing a 48-hour pause in hostilities, India said the onus was now on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam to allow the trapped civilians to move to the designated safe zones. "Our concern is to prevent the humanitarian situation from getting worse. We are very happy there is a pause to allow civilians out. Whether the LTTE allows that, we don't know but it puts the onus on them," said authoritative sources here. The civilians held hostage were enduring an "animal level survival" and India's priority was to get them quickly into a "normal situation." The understanding here is that about 1.5 lakh civilians are caught in the conflict and the figure of four lakh is "physically impossible." With about 5,000 civilians having managed to get out of the conflict zone, the focus now is on separating innocent civilians from the LTTE fighters. "Otherwise, with fighting in its closing stages, civilians are likely to be killed. One side might say they were being used as human shields; the other would claim they were killed by artillery barrages," the sources said. In this respect, the sources referred to Thursday night's statement by Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon. He welcomed Sri Lankan President Mahinda

Rajapaksa's "important announcement" about the pause in hostilities, and hoped that with the implementation of these steps, the condition of the civilians would improve. Mr. Menon suggested the "safe zone" concept during his Colombo visit earlier this month and the number of zones were expanded after External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee's visit earlier this week. The reading here is that the Sri Lanka Army is "steadily grinding forward" and is "absolutely confident" of wrapping up its operations in the next two to three weeks. As for LTTE chief V. Prabakaran, Colombo believes that he is still in the area as his "legend won't allow him to leave." The talk in Colombo of Prabakaran having left Sri Lanka "could be a ploy to get him to stick his neck out," the sources said. "This is a lot to ask after 23 years of war and with most Tamil political leaders killed. There are the questions of livelihood, economic reconstruction, ports, roads, railways…it is a huge job ahead. Then there is the issue of dealing with the young soldiers who are likely to be demobilised. "The society is not large enough for them to pass unnoticed. We are seeing a phased change in Sri Lanka and this is an opportunity for its government to do something proper in devolution. India will be trying to work with the Sri Lankan government in all these aspects."

US will be wrong to link J&K with Pak's western border: NSA

National security advisor M K Narayanan has said that the Obama administration would be barking up the wrong tree if it tried to link the situation on the Pak-Afghan border with the J&K dispute between India and Pakistan. Narayanan also admitted that New Delhi had been taken aback when Barack Obama during his campaign and then as president-elect made statements to suggest a link between J&K and Pakistan's western border. "Yes, references made by President Obama, which seem to suggest that there is some kind of link with settlement on Pakistan's western border and the Kashmir issue, certainly have caused concern. What somebody says, either when he is in campaign mode or when he is president-elect... we are trying to say let's wait and see what he does when he comes into office," Narayanan said during the course of a television interview. "I don't think we have had any major exchanges with members of Obama's administration, let alone with President Obama himself. There have been courtesy calls, discussions and that kind of stuff. I think we are in a nascent state. I do think that we could make President Obama understand, if he does nurse any such view, that he is barking up the wrong tree," Narayanan went on to say. Narayanan further said there could be elements in the Obama administration who want Indo-US relations to revert back to the pre-2000 era. "I think Kashmir today has become one of the quieter and safer places in this part of the world. People there want more electricity, better connectivity, internet and other usual things. So, I think it is possible to convince them. It's possible that at this time there are elements perhaps in the administration who are harking back to the pre-2000 era. I think it should be possible for us to make him and his advisors understand this problem. So we are not making this a big issue as of now," Narayanan said. On special envoy Richard Holbrooke visiting India, Narayanan said he would be welcomed here as India has "vital interests" in what he would do in Afghanistan and Pakistan but added that India does not want anyone "to come to us for Kashmir". "If he brings up Kashmir, we will explain to him what the position is, what we want to do," he said, adding that in the past too, there were special envoys who had come and discussed with India issues in the region.

Narayanan said after the latter part of the Clinton regime and the eight years of George Bush's

rule, India figures much more prominently in the calculations of the United States than Pakistan or the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Asked whether it would have been easy to deal with Bush administration rather than Obama on the issue of terrorism and bringing Lashkar-e-Taiba to justice, he said he did not think so. "As far as this area is concerned, I think in fighting terrorism, Obama will be guided principally by the top part of the administration which we were associated with in recent years. I don't see any problem. I think both the countries have started a course which cannot be easily reversed," he added. On strengthening NPT and possibility of increased international pressure on India to sign it, he said, "I presume that instead of ratifying CTBT and NPT, I think there would be more pressure on us. I think we will solve the problem when it comes to us. We had pressure in the past too." He added, "As of now, we are a nuclear weapons power and nobody can prevent us and come and say that we are not a nuclear power." Asked if he expects Obama to make any changes in the Indo-US nuclear deal, he said, "I don't think he will have any reservations in a deal which was signed by his predecessor. I don't think he will make changes. That is not the way democracy works and that is not the way US democracy works." On Pakistan, Narayanan said dealing with Pervez Musharraf was easier than the present civilian government in Islamabad. He added though that a stable and democratic Pakistan was imperative for India to prevent the Taliban surge.

“India can expect open policy from Obama”

Noting that the Barack Obama administration was taking U.S.-India relations very seriously, the former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, Teresita Schaffer, has said that India can expect an open policy from Mr. Obama’s team. She was initiating a roundtable discussion on “India and U.S.: What Lies Ahead” at the Observer Research Foundation here. Ms. Schaffer, Director of the South Asia Program at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, wanted the U.S. to develop “techniques and vocabularies to deal with India’s strategic autonomy and its wariness about getting too close to the U.S. in policy terms.” Both the countries should develop techniques to deal with each other and take the relations to strategic terms in future, she suggested. Ms. Schaffer said that India and the U.S. had common interests in the evolving balance of power in Asia – in energy security, maritime security, climate change and peaceful and the harmonious rise of China. There was a big window of opportunity for both countries to reshape the global non-proliferation system in the wake of the India-U.S. nuclear deal. Ms. Schaffer said Mr. Obama’s policy-makers have admitted that the big threat of nuclear proliferation was not from India but from countries such as Iran and North Korea. Mr. Obama would bring “new dynamics” at the United Nations but she did not foresee “dramatic changes” in the short-term although the negative U.S. attitude might not continue forever. Ms. Schaffer said policy-makers in the U.S. see the India-Pakistan dispute as one of the world’s major unresolved issues and Kashmir as part of this problem. Managing Pakistan was one of the challenges of Obama administration but the disadvantages of a civilian government in Pakistan were that the Army was a separate actor. She wanted the Pakistan Army to be taken along in some fashion to solve the India-Pakistan disputes. “It is a big political challenge,” she noted. Ms. Schaffer was hopeful that the new U.S. government would be “very supportive” in helping to solve the India-Pakistan problem, but “if nothing happens, it would be nervous about it.”

Indian with Al Qaida link held

An Indian national has been arrested in Spain for possible links with Al-Qaida and India has sought consular access to him, the government confirmed.Quoting information received from the Indian Embassy in Spain, the sources said the name of the arrested Indian was given as Jangeet Singh. He was arrested on Tuesday along with 12 others suspected of falsifying documents and will be produced in a court in Madrid. The arrests took place between Barcelona and the eastern city of Valencia.Earlier media reports quoting a police spokeswoman in Valencia province had said four Indians and one Pakistani were arrested in the eastern town of Mislata. However, the sources here clarified that only one of the arrested persons was Indian while the other four were Pakistanis. It is still not clear if the arrested Indian has any connections with the Al Qaida with government sources maintaining that he was held in connection with falsifying documents. News reports coming out of Spain citing police sources had indicated that the arrested men had supplied forged passports for use by Al Qaida operatives. However, the Spanish police has not officially mentioned any links of the arrested man with Al Qaida.
A statement from the Spanish police said the detainees 11 Pakistanis, a Nigerian and an Indian were suspected of belonging to an international crime gang involved in passport forgery, drug trafficking and people-smuggling. Investigations are on to find out whether they had supplied forged documents to international terrorist groups, a euphemism for extremist groups like the Al Qaida. According to investigators, the ring operated by stealing passports in various Spanish cities and sending these to Thailand, where they would be altered and sent to criminal networks in the other five European countries to facilitate fraudulent border crossings. Last month, six Pakistanis were held in Barcelona on suspicion of tax fraud and diverting funds to Islamic extremist groups. They were freed days later for lack of evidence.

Indian workers attacked in Afghanistan

A convoy carrying Indian construction workers came under attack from suspected Taliban in an eastern Afghanistan but no one was injured. One vehicle, carrying three Indians, was badly damaged when an improvised explosive device went off around 7.45 a.m. when the convoy was on its way to a construction site in Khost.

AQ Khan's release another deception by Pak: India

Reacting sharply to the release of disgraced nuclear scientist AQ Khan by Islamabad High Court, India on Friday said “the move is another example of deception by Pakistan”. Speaking exclusively to Times Now, MoS external affairs Anand Sharma says, “AQ Khan's release by the Pakistan’s court would be detrimental to global peace and security.” “Pakistan has deceived India again by setting Khan free,” Sharma added. Earlier, Islamabad High Court declared disgraced nuclear scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan a free citizen and abolished his house arrest. Following his release, Khan stated, “The Pakistan government is strong and the armed forces can tackle everyone.” However, he said "there is no threat from India, nothing like that has happened." Khan, lionised by many Pakistanis as the father of the country's atomic bomb, was pardoned but placed under house arrest in 2004 by the then president, Pervez Musharraf, soon after he made a televised confession to selling nuclear secrets to Iran, North Korea and Libya. A court upheld his detention last July and barred him from talking to the media about nuclear proliferation while he was under house arrest. Last year, a UN nuclear watchdog said Khan's network smuggled nuclear weaponisation blueprints to Iran, Libya and North Korea and was active in 12 countries.